

Bulletin of the Birdwatchers Society of Andhra Pradesh

New Series. Volume 2 Number 1. January 2005

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PROGRAMME - January

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 9-i-2005: Manjira Barrage, Rangareddi District: Route Punjagutta - Ameerpet - Sanathnagar - Kukatpally - Patancheru - Sangareddy. From Sangareddy Mandal Office, turn left and go in for 3 km to the EEC centre. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 - 7.30 am and assemble at the EEC Centre. There should be lots of migrants around at this time of the year, with the waterfowl already in in impressive numbers. Added attractions here are the Openbilled and Painted Storks that nest on islands in the reservoir. There are sure to be lots of ducks, especially Pintails, Pochards, Shovellers, Teal and Widgeons around, maybe even a few Barheaded Geese. Ospreys are often seen, as also Demoiselle Cranes. Look out also for Mugger Crocodiles in the lake. This will be a full-day trip. Carry water and packed lunches. For further details contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

INDOOR MEETING: 17-i-2005, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be announced in the Press.

NOTES & NEWS

AN IMPROMPTU VISIT TO HIMAYAT SAGAR

TANK

By

Shafaat Ulla

It all started with Deccan Chronicle publishing a photograph of Flamingos wading in Himayat Sagar lake, about twenty kilometers south-east of Hyderabad city. Flamingos in Hyderabad? Impossible! The first to rush and satisfy their curiosity were Raajeev and Azam, our fellow members from BSAP, who promptly reported to us the wonderful sighting.

Next day, Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> December, Aasheesh couldn't contain himself and I joined him early in the morning and we headed towards the lake, armed with binoculars and spotting scope and a variety of field guide books.

It was a sad sight that greeted us as far as the water is concerned, since the entire lake was dried up except for a small shallow patch of muddy water in the centre. This however, proved to be a boon for the birds as thousands of them, consisting of about thirty varieties, converged on the water body for an extended feast.

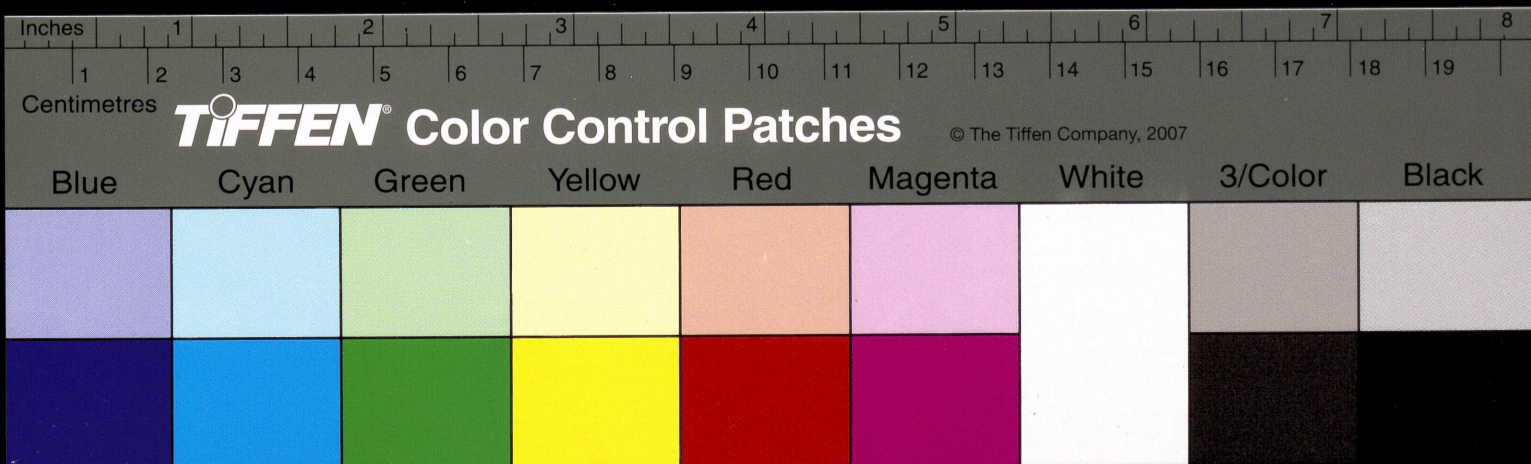
We could count about fifty Greater Flamingos foraging near the water's edge with their very special inverted beaks. So many flamingos with their beautiful pink feathers is indeed a very rare

sight in our area. The other surprise that awaited us was the presence of about 400 to 500 Open-billed Storks, whose main diet are snails, which obviously were plentiful. The other rarely seen birds were a couple of Avocets with their upturned slender bills and pure white plumage as if they had used Surf XL! Then there was a pair of equally rare Curlews, with their long and thin down-curved beaks, probing deep into the soft mud.

For bird lovers, it was a feast for the eyes, as we could see hundreds of ducks, consisting of Spotbills, Red-crested Pochards and Brahminy Ducks. As we were busy identifying the ducks, in flies four pairs of Barheaded Geese, who circled for a while before settling down. As if this was not enough, about twenty Spoonbills took off from the far end and flew overhead in a neat and unhurried formation with their odd spoon-shaped bills sticking out in front.

There were a variety of other waders and we were going crazy identifying them, mainly because of the distance. Apart from the Blackwinged Stilts which were in excess of easily one hundred, there were Blacktailed Godwits, Ruffs, Redshanks and Sandpipers; as also Grey Herons, Painted Storks, Little and Median Egrets, et. al.

An exciting addition to our sighting was the *tamasha* that was being performed by the streamlined River Terns, doing beautiful aerobatics along with Black and Brownheaded Gulls, hovering over the nets of two fishermen who happened to be preparing for



their dinner. Also in the fray was a graceful Brahminy Kite gliding effortlessly over the water looking to steal a tasty morsel.

Although we could have stayed the whole day, we had to rush back reluctantly, as it was a working day; but not before promising ourselves to come back soon with other birdwatchers, before the lake dries up completely and the birds bid us adieu to seek greener pastures elsewhere.

### URBAN BIRDING

by  
"The City Bird-Brain"

This column has had a two-fold advantage. Firstly, so I have been informed, it is making other members more aware of the birds surrounding them. Secondly, it is making me more aware of the birds around me – to take the first example that comes to hand: I have added a most unusual species to my list of urban birds. A Common Sandpiper was spotted in the bed of the rather dirty stream that runs behind the house. Now, this stream seems to be composed almost entirely of soapsuds and other rather gruesome looking objects (a dead rat, amongst other things...!), yet the Sandpiper was there, and piping away quite happily, it appeared. However, my object this week is not the Common Sandpiper; I want to focus this week's column on that most ubiquitous bird, the common House Crow.

Who does not know this bird – and yet I venture to assert that, with all the work done on this species, there will always be something new to observe if one only sets about observations over a long and sustained period. Their penchant for robbery and piracy is, of course, well known. When I was in the Crocodile Bank near Chennai, these birds were amongst the most unwelcome pests we have ever had. Not only were they partial to young crocs and other baby reptiles like tortoises and turtles, they also had developed a great taste for the crocodile food (fish and beef offal and bone). One could always tell the feeding day from other days from the huge number of crows that suddenly congregated from all over the district on the Croc Bank on feeding days. And in spite of all the hectic activity in the Croc enclosures to get at the food, I have never seen a crow wind up in a crocodile's mouth. Obviously their instinct for self-preservation is quite strong.

Talking of self-preservation, in the old days when we young lads were more adept in the use of the air rifle than the binoculars, I have put in many assiduous hours in the pursuit of House Crows. To no avail – the clever creatures were well aware of the difference between a rifle and a stick. Point a stick at them and they would cock an eye at you and caw in amusement. Appear on the scene carrying a rifle, or even a catapult, and the blackguards would be in flight long before you got within decent range.

I reckon there is only one other bird that can get the better of the House Crow in combat, and that is the Black Drongo. On the other hand, I have seen even the Small Blue Kingfisher delivering some hefty whacks with its bill on the back of a House Crow that appeared to have designs on the nest of the Kingfisher. The Drongo, on the other hand, knows what to do when a Crow appears and, what is more, the Crow knows this as well.

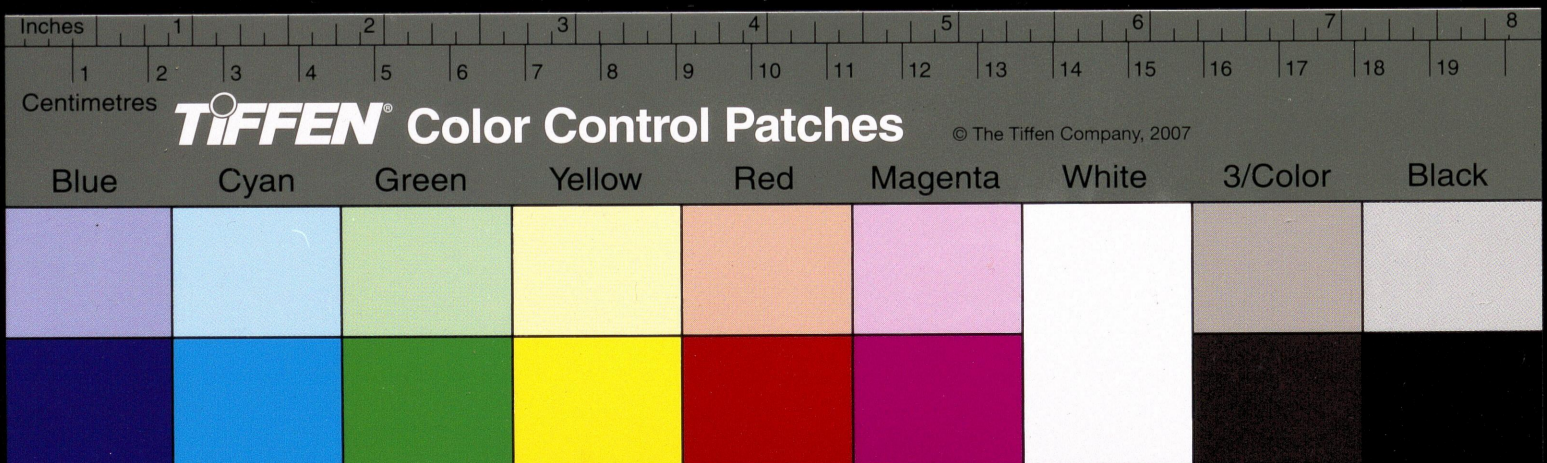
Consequently, they keep well away from the Drongos – why court unnecessary trouble, seems to be their motto. Quite intelligent too. But this very intelligence is used by the Koel in its habit of foisting its eggs onto the crows. Observe the male Koel appear near the nest of the crow while the female Koel slips up noiselessly from behind. Then, while the crows are in hot pursuit of her spouse, she flies into the unguarded nest, lays her eggs and slips out again with the crows none the wiser. Crows can count up to two and if, on their return to the nest, they can see more than two eggs, then they are quite happy and satisfied that the nest has not been tampered with. So the crows carry on with the domestic chores and, when the speckled Koel chicks hatch, they are quite proud of them. Not quite as intelligent as they are made out to be, apparently!

The House Crow has completely adapted itself to life in the city. So much so that, where there is no human activity, there will be found no crows. Don't take my word for it – go out to the jungles and do a count of how many crows you see. I guarantee that you will not have many, if at all. On the other hand, even without any attempt at counting, it is impossible to spend a day in any city without a sighting of at least a dozen odd crows here and there. And if you happen to live in an area where these chaps roost, then you will know all about it. They ensure that... through their noisy cawing and loud bedtime conversations before they finally drop off to sleep. And at times like this, they are likely to fall prey to the Great Horned Owl. The Owl knows the value of secrecy and silence in its pursuit of crows. If he gives himself away, there is no way he can make a kill on that particular night as all the crows in the roost will descend on him en-masse and hound him out of a year's growth! The wise owl ensures that the kill is made with all possible speed and with the minimum of noise and fuss.

With all its bad habits (breakfasting on a dead rat in the middle of the road, stealing whatever it can lay its beak on, etc. etc.) I have a soft spot for this creature. He is so universally NOT LIKED that one cannot help feeling admiration that he survives, indeed thrives, in the midst of all this anti-crow movement. But at the same time be it mentioned that, if you have a liking for little birds nesting in your garden, then the crow is the last visitor you want. Great robbers of nests, these birds think nothing of taking eggs, young birds and even adult birds if they can catch them. That sickle bill is a most effective hunting weapon. I have seen a house crow making a meal off a warbler. Whether he had caught it himself or found it dead, I do not know; but I incline to the former. They are good hunters when they have to be.

Hunted too, are these birds. The cages in the Chowk bird market will always have a few rather sorry-looking crows peering hopefully out of the bars. Who would be wanting to buy them, I cannot say – but there must be a market, or the canny bird-dealer wouldn't be stocking the species. Maybe the practitioners of the black arts, the tantrics, use them for Black Magic. Or maybe they have other uses of a culinary nature...! Whatever the reason, they are there – I have seen more than 20 stuffed in a single cage, which couldn't hold more than 10 at the most.

They have their enemies in the wild as well – the Lugger Falcon is partial to them as part of its diet. The odd crow will also find



its way into the belly of the Peregrine Falcon. But apart from the falcon tribe, the birds have few enemies to reckon with. And even the falcons are not always successful in having crows for lunch. That self-preservation instinct comes out even more strongly when the crows are pursued by a raptor. I have only a few times seen one caught – and that was mostly a solitary specimen, and not a member of a flock.

Talking of flocks, it is learnt that a flock of crows is collectively called a “murder”, than which there could be no more appropriate name. Put a “murder” of crows on the air and the music they manage to generate is sheer murder. I remember seeing a large rookery in Khammam once – about half a mile before you got to the place, you could hear it.

But enough of this subject or the goodwill I have managed to generate through this column will rapidly disappear if I go on about such creatures as the House Crows. I will merely reiterate that, no matter how much you think you know these birds, they will always produce something new that you had never noticed before. So put on those observation caps and spare some time to observe the House Crow. Until next time – Happy Birding!

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**Post-script:** Apropos of seeing interesting birds in the city, here’s a list of my latest sightings (on 12<sup>th</sup> December) in the backyard around the aforementioned dirty stream: Great Tit, Common White-Eye, Grey Wagtail, Whitebreasted Waterhen and Whitebrowed Fantail Flycatcher; to name just a few. Also a Spotted Owllet was heard just last night (13<sup>th</sup> December). For the interested; be it mentioned that I have around 15 km. of built-up area around my humble residence! All of which brings us back to the observation I made in the first of these memoirs that, whether we want them or not, the birds are there: And they can be seen also from time to time. Keep those eyes peeled...!

### NIZAMABAD: AT LAST!

by  
Arjun

September 10<sup>th</sup> - The trip to Nizamabad (after many postponements) was finally underway. The day dawned bright and clear as five of us (Mr Shafaat Ulla, Mr Bhaskar Rao, Ms Shweta Vyas, Ms Sheetal Vyas and yours truly) met at the Jubilee bus stand. It was not going to remain bright and clear though. We boarded the bus, bought our tickets, and finally, we were off. No sooner had we left the city limits, than it started raining. And rain it did, all the way to Nizamabad. Our host, Mr Ashok Kumar, received us at the bus stand. He had made arrangements for our stay, on the top floor of a school run by him.

We freshened up and went out for lunch. It was still raining. It rained all afternoon, washing out all chances of birding. Since no birding was possible, some of us did a bit of local sightseeing in the evening, which was very interesting. We visited the old fort, now divided into a prison and a temple. We climbed to the very top of the fort and from the window there we were able to catch a close view of a few Pariah kites (*Milvus migrans*) and House Swifts (*Apus affinis*) on the wing. This was followed up by a visit

to another temple and a church, which yielded us a fleeting glimpse of a large owl (at the temple), and two smaller ones at the church. Due to circumstances beyond our control, the owls remain unidentified. We then walked back, snacking on mirchi bhajjis on the way. We were joined later that night by another member, Priyank (who brought along with him, a GPS instrument). After enjoying dinner (which was a trifle delayed), we retired for the day.

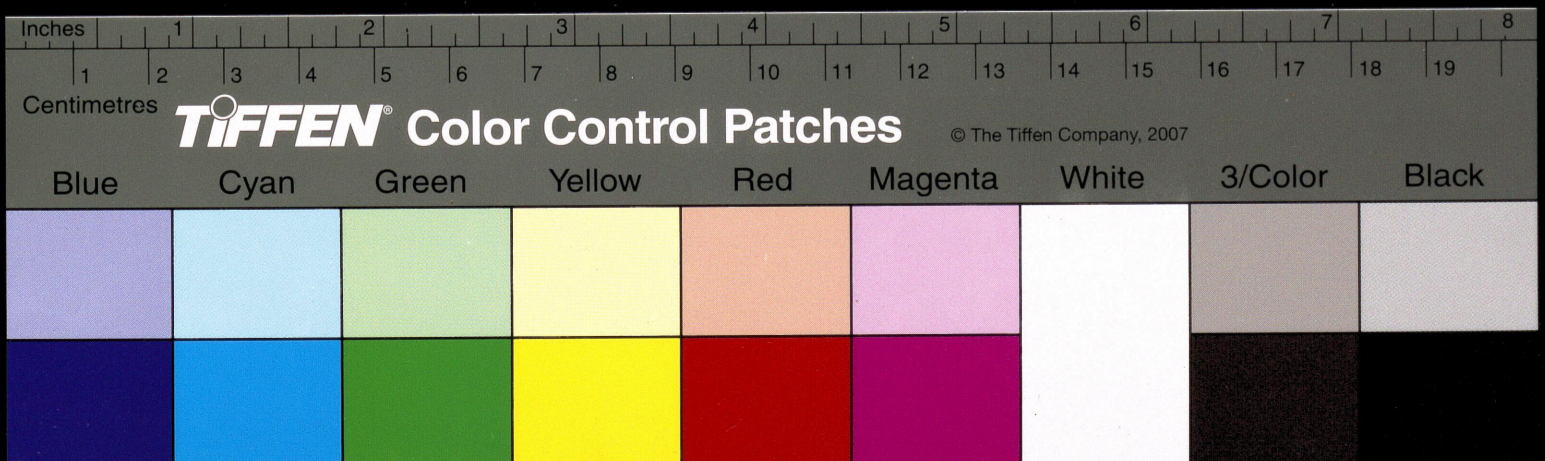
September 11<sup>th</sup> - We got off to an early start, with everyone waking up at 5 AM. Thankfully it was not raining. We celebrated the fact with a round of tea, and set off in a jeep that was hired for us by our host. Our first stop was a lake called Ashoksagar (18°42.411’N 78°02.190’E. Alt: 384m). The sight that greeted us was that of a crab, pincers raised, not unlike a sheriff in a cowboy film, trying to keep outlaws out of his town. We saw a tree that was host to more than ten Baya weaver bird’s nests. Some other notable sightings included, a Brahminy kite (*Haliastur indus*), a Small Blue Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), hovering over the water, and an unidentified Eagle.

We moved along from there to another lake Alisagar (18°40.822’N 78°00.628’E. Alt: 387m). We were greeted (almost at the gate), by a Goldfronted Chloropsis (*Chloropsis aurifrons*). It gave us a pretty good look at it, almost as if it were a model at the India Fashion week. There were many Rose ringed Parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) there but not much else.

From there we moved on to yet another water body called Tanakala lake (18°40.132’N 78°00.176’E Alt: 387m). This yielded quite a few interesting sightings, apart from the more commonly seen birds. We did see a few Redwattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*), a Blackbellied Finch-Lark (*Eremopterix grisea*), a Pied Kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*), a Spotted Munia (*Lonchura punctulata*) and a few Small Blue Kingfishers, but what really took the cake was the sighting of a group of twelve Black Headed Munias (*Lonchura malacca*). These munias put on quite a wonderful show for us, a song and dance show. Twelve of them sitting on a single branch flitting here and there, jumping short distances, only to return, giving us a great view from almost every angle imaginable. It was very well choreographed indeed.

On the road from Tanakala, (position: 18°37.984’N 77°59.539’E Alt 381m) we came across a tree with many egrets congregated there. When we got down to get a closer look, we saw nearby a bush with more than twenty House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). On the other side of the road we saw a few Baya’s nests. Now what was surprising was the fact that there was a White throated Munia (*Lonchura malabarica*) that was trying repeatedly to enter the Baya’s nests, but the Bayas every time chased it away. What was the motive behind this? Was the munia looking for a quick snack? Was it trying to hijack the nest? Or was it just a nest-to-nest sales bird trying to earn an honest living?

We moved on to the lake behind the Somalingeshwar temple (18°24.752’N 77°52.156’E Alt 372), where we saw some water birds like the Indian Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), Pheasant tailed Jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*) and Bronze-winged Jacana (*Metopidius indicus*). The sighting that stood out here was

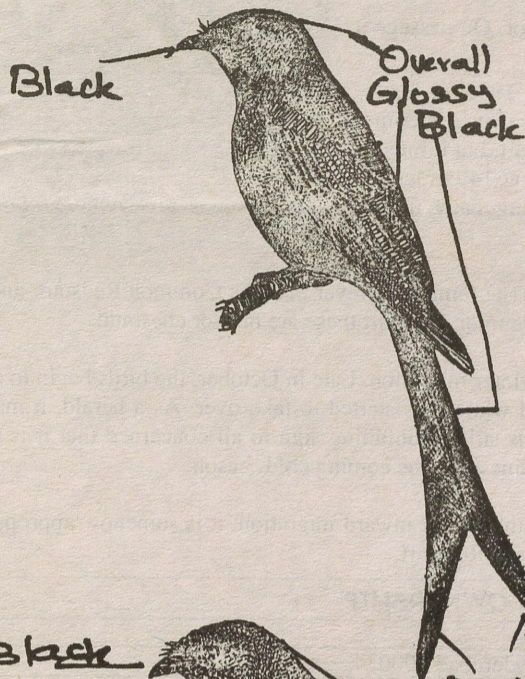




FIELD CRAFT - Siraj A Taher and Sachin Jaltare

DRONGOS: These are black birds with long forked tails. They inhabit both forest and open country where they perch on exposed points looking for insect prey. Drongos are rather noisy and often solitary.

**BLACK DRONGO**  
(*Dicrurus naevocercus*)  
L=31 cms. Bulbul +  
sexes alike



Black

Dark Glossy  
Ashy-grey

**ASHY DRONGO**

(*Dicrurus leucophaeus*)

L=30 cms  
Bulbul +

sexes alike

Deep  
Forked  
Tail

Black

Deep Forked  
Tail

Gray

Glossy  
Indigo

White Belly  
& Vent

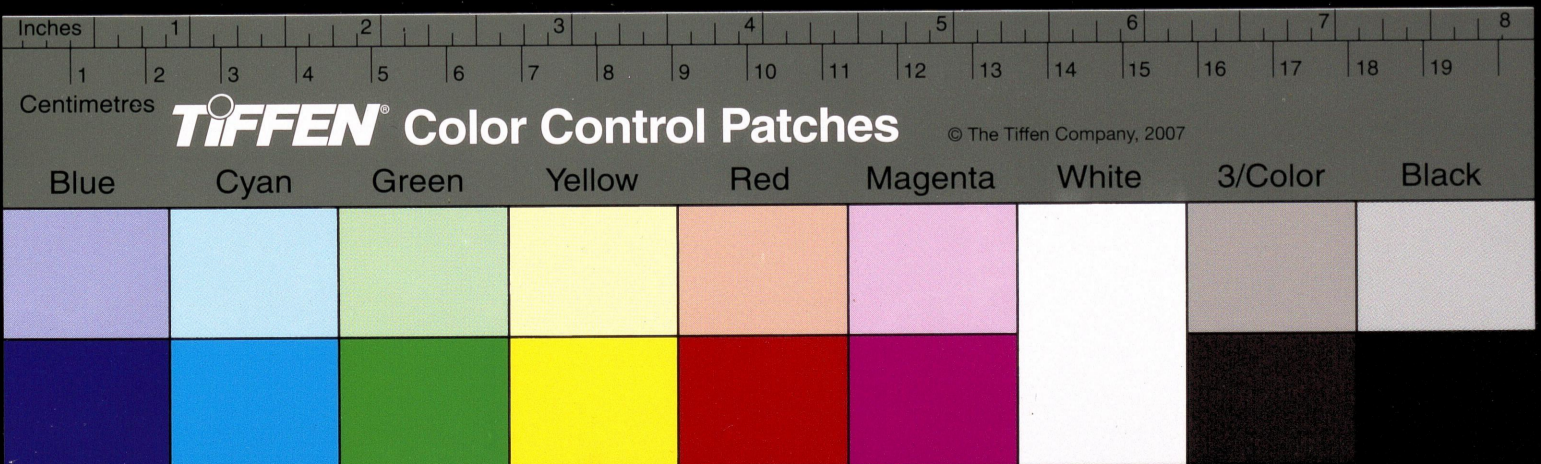
**WHITE-BELLIED DRONGO**

(*Dicrurus caeruleus*)

L=24 cms, Bulbul +

sexes alike

Forked  
Tail



BIRD OF THE MONTH - THE BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*)

The Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) is a small passerine bird that was formerly classed as a member of the Thrush family (*Turdidae*), but is now more generally considered to be an Old World flycatcher (*Muscicapidae*).

It is a widespread breeder in south and central Europe, but very localised in Great Britain. It is resident in the milder parts of its range, but northern birds winter in southern Europe or North Africa. It nests in crevices or holes in buildings.

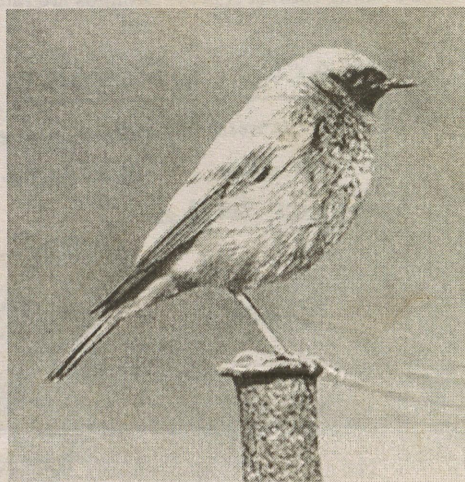
It is more common in Britain as a bird of passage and winter visitor. On passage it is fairly common on the east and south coasts.

Reports of early Common Redstarts (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) may sometimes refer to this species. The "fire" of the tail labels the bird as a Redstart, but it may be distinguished from the Common Redstart, which is the same size at 14 cm length, by its sootier appearance, even when the distinctive white wing patch is not apparent, as in immature males.

The male has no chestnut on the flanks nor white on the forehead. The female is greyer than the Common Redstart, and at any age the grey axillaries and under wing-coverts are distinctive. In the Common Redstart these are buff or chestnut.

The Black Redstart in most parts of India, is the harbinger of the winter migration. Late in October, the birds begin to appear - and that generally means that the monsoon is now officially over and winter has started to take over. As a herald, it may not be as accurate as the Pied Crested Cuckoo is for the monsoons, but it is still an unfailing sign to all concerned that it is time to take those sweaters and jackets out of the cupboard and air them in readiness for the coming cold season.

Seeing that the Redstarts are in, and they being the forerunner of the winter inward migration, it is somehow appropriate that we begin our series on the Bird of the Month, with this species, the Black Redstart.



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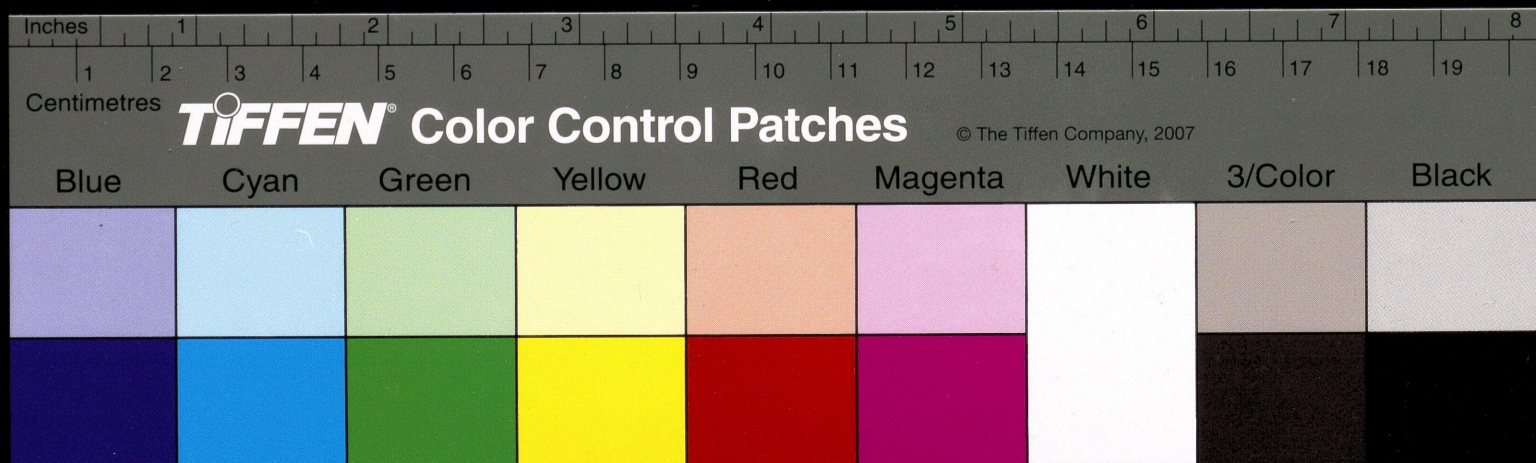
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Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [kirankatikaneni@indiainfo.com](mailto:kirankatikaneni@indiainfo.com)

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# IPBTTA



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## Field Outing

### Thursday, 16-vi-2005: Chilkur Deer Park, Hyderabad

menaipatnam: Langar House: A P Police Academy. Meet at the venue by 6.45 a.m. This will be a half-day trip. Chilkur is rich in small woodland birds – there should be warblers and some flycatchers around as well. Members of the pheasant family also are particularly well-represented. Keep an ear open for the calls of the Painted Partridge. Peafowl, Grey Partridge and Quail also are often seen. For those who love those LBJ's it's absolute paradise! The youngsters will have lots of Chital to look at – maybe the odd Sambar will also appear. Look for the Oriole nest near the EEC. There should also be a Spotted Munia nest in the vicinity. Carry plenty of water and snacks.

### Sunday, 26-vi-2005: Narsapur Reserve Forest, Medak

Meet near the small temple at the side of the road by the milestone. Sightings include many interesting species like the Pygmy and Mahratta Woodpeckers, both species of Chloropsis, and possibly Spangled Drongo as well. Woodland birds are a certainty, possibly also Indian Pitta, Ground Thrush and Paradise Flycatcher. On the lake, there will be River Terns and maybe Cotton Teals and Openbilled Storks. Look out for the larger owls, both Great Horned and Brown Fish Owl. Crested Serpent Eagle and maybe a Crested Hawk-Eagle also may well be seen if really lucky. This will be a full day trip; carry packed lunches and plenty of water.

For further details contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098) or Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

## Indoor Meeting

### Monday, 20-vi-2005, 6 p.m.:

Vidyananya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be announced in the press

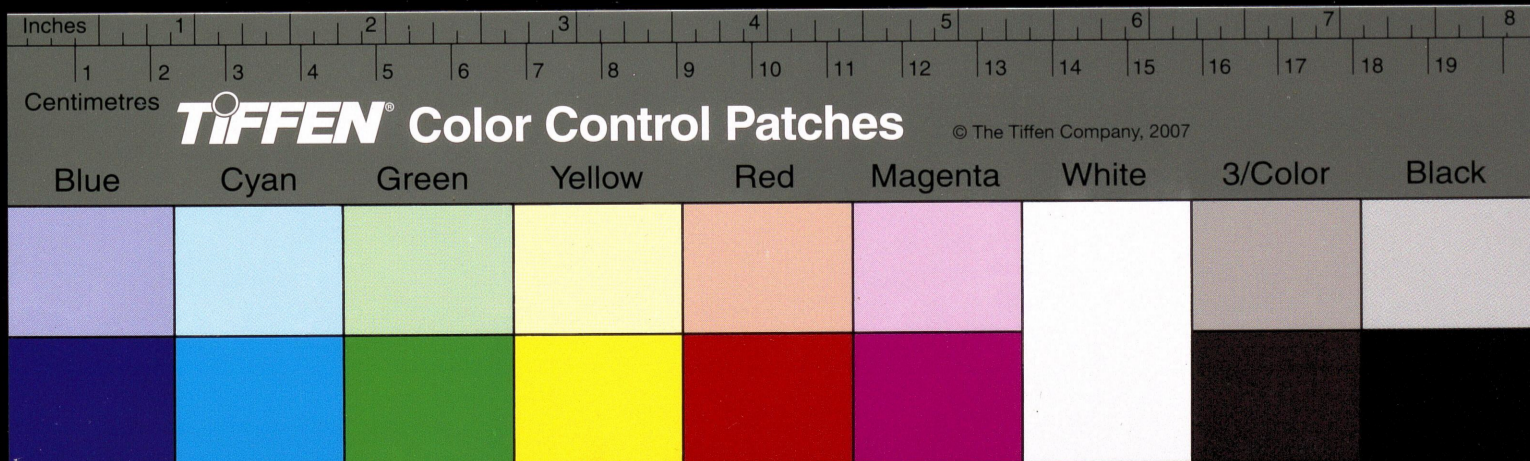
## NEWS & NOTES

### Flamingos (and more) at Osman Sagar

By Suhel Quader

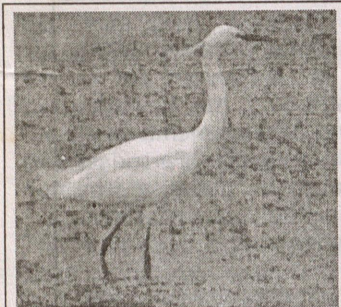
**A**lerted by a short article in The Hindu newspaper the previous day, a small group of us sets out for Osman Sagar (on the western outskirts of Hyderabad) early on 9 May hoping to see Greater Flamingos. There is scarcely any water in the lake; the far shore is depressingly close to the bund, and rocks and old structures stand out of the water, bone dry. Fifteen or twenty fishermen paddle about in the

knee-deep water. On the northern and southern shores, small knots of lorries cluster around shallow excavations in the dry lake bed. Bare-torsoed men dig up clods of red earth and load them into the trucks, bound, no doubt, for a construction site in the city. In the distance, a single man makes his way purposefully to the lake's edge, there to commune with nature



and, perhaps, to contemplate the receding wavelets while doing so.

Having installed ourselves at the southern edge of the lake bund, we (Aasheesh and Prakriti Pittie, and I) almost immediately see the birds we are looking for, in a loose cluster in the shallows surprisingly close to a couple of earth-lorries. The flamingos waver unsteadily in the sights of our spotting scopes, their heads zigzagging underwater as though each has lost a valuable coin and is frantically feeling for it. A quick count reveals about 50 birds (49, 52, and 52 are the numbers from the three observers) in that flock. Scanning elsewhere, we find a few more flamingos – some singles, two groups of three – bringing the total to about 60. Some of these latter are small enough and pink enough to look suspiciously like Lesser Flamingos, but distance defeats a definitive ID.



A Little Egret showing off its aigrettes at Osman Sagar

An almost-dry lake sounds like a depressing place, but not so Osman Sagar today. The lake and its edges are full of birds. Egrets of all descriptions (well, all right: **three** species) dot the lakeshore, keeping a dainty distance from the sombre-looking Grey Herons. Openbill Storks straggle all along the shoreline, some probing with their strange beaks into the not-yet-baked-hard mud about 30 metres

from the water's edge. A few Painted Storks manage to look decorative perched high upon a tall pile of boulders with whitewashed tops. Little bands of Blackwinged Stilts in non-breeding plumage pick their careful way along the water's edge, and the melancholy "tiu-tiu" call of the odd Greenshank wafts its way across to us. Far across the lake, a huge flock of about a thousand cormorants stands on a spit of land, silent and orderly, like nuns awaiting smoke signals heralding the new pope.

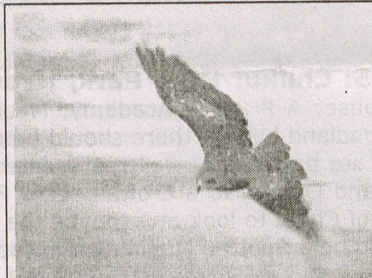
The water itself contains the expected waterfowl in the low hundreds: Spot-billed Ducks, Lesser Whistling Teal, and Cotton Pygmy-geese (Cotton Teal to you and me). But also some surprises: a lone Brahminy Duck, and four or five Shovelers in a flock; silent rebels against migration's call. Several godwits have also decided to stay back for the summer, and these probe desultorily in the shallows.



A pensive Openbill

Yet more birds in the air above the lake. A handful of Pariah Kites wheel around as is their

habit. One or two Brahminy Kites hang about as if waiting for something to happen. A gull wafts by, and several terns – of both the River and the Whiskered persuasion. Then, wait – it's a tern, it's small, with a black belly and white wings, but its head and back are also black, contrasting with a snow-white tail which is short and square-ended. Quick, where is the book? Krys-with-the-unpronounceable-surname; Plate 39; Plate 40; Plate 41; here we are! It must be.. But wait! It's confusable with.. we need another look – does it have a black armpit? This is critical. Here it comes again and this time we're ready – two with binoculars, one on the scope. Yes! It's official – a new bird for the region: a White-winged Tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*, if you're finicky about these things) in full breeding plumage. The tern seems to be working a regular circuit: it passes by our section of the lake once every 15 minutes or so, and we get good views every time. Well done and congratulations all around! I think we should all go on impulsive birding trips more often, don't you?



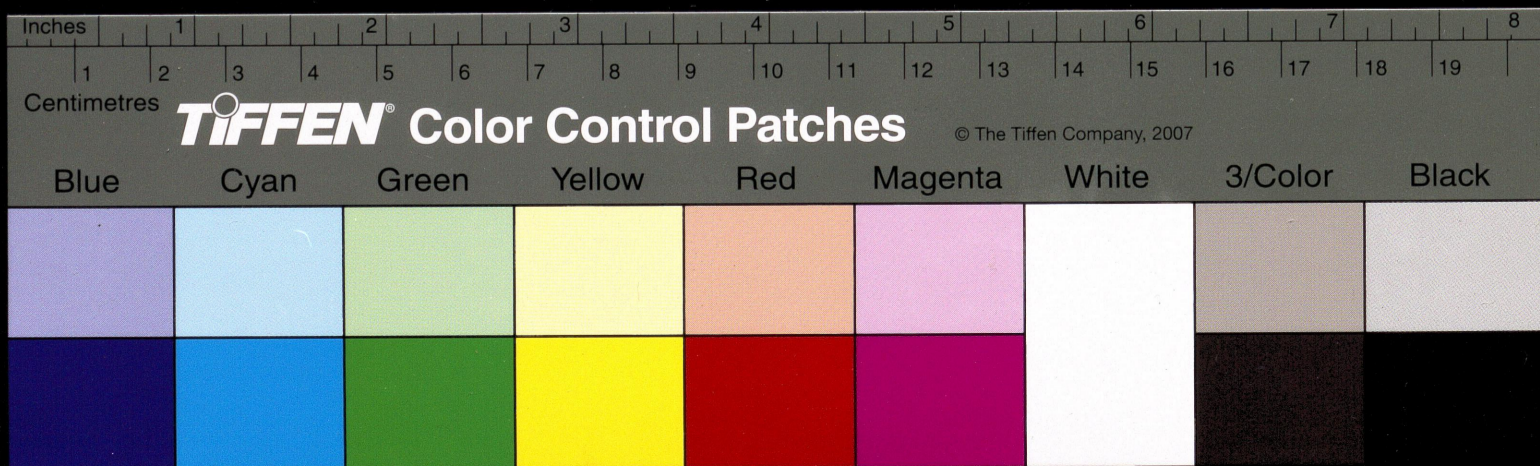
Pariah Kite "wheeling": this is a specialised kind of flight defined by its apparent aimlessness

**Postscript:**

The following Sunday (the 15<sup>th</sup>) a group of about 40 birders and friends gather at Osman Sagar. An attempt to broaden the audience by inviting the public to come and appreciate the flamingos

has failed because none of the newspapers that promised to carry the story actually did so. Still, we are rewarded with an excellent morning's birding. The flamingos are there, as are a few other should-be-gone-north ducks: a Garganey here, a couple of handsome Pintails there. And also another surprise: a lone Spot-billed Pelican! This fine individual (a juvenile, judging from its brown plumage) starts the morning on the far side of the lake, standing on the bank next to the water, and preening. When we look again half an hour later, it has moved much closer – right across from us, and very clear through each of the three spotting scopes we have set up. Here, it perches sedately on a rock, flanked on either side by a Painted Stork, the whole scene looking carefully arranged for our benefit.

And of course there is much other birding besides the spectacle of unusual species. Purple Herons and Purple Moorhens stalk the bare banks of the lake, looking quite out of place away from their usual marshy habitat. Swallows and Martins, Swifts and Pratincoles, the list goes on. But finally, as the sun climbs relentlessly in the sky, the fishermen start to trickle away with the day's catch. The air starts shimmering in the heat and it's time for us to effect a prudent retreat.



## Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

When the mango fruit hangs heavy on the branches of the mango trees, there is one bird that is generally always seen in the gardens – a flash of gold and yellow, with a touch of black. This is the immediate impression of the discerning person when he first sets eyes on the Golden Oriole – though some people prefer to call him the mango bird. A very apt title; as the birds generally appear with the ripe mangoes, and if possessed of a little imagination, it is not difficult to mistake one of these birds for a mango, either.

Golden Orioles are not frequently encountered in the city and, as such, it is perhaps a bit presumptuous of me to label them as urban birds. However, they are seen often enough in fruit orchards and, if you happen to have a mango tree in the vicinity, then you will know all about it as they are generally always to be seen hopping around in the branches. Therefore, we will give them the status of urban birds this once – if for no other reason than that I have just yesterday seen one arrive on the food tray in the balcony. It was a male bird too and he managed to dazzle me with his gold and black plumage to such an extent that I immediately took pen and paper and started to tell about him and his ilk.

A Golden Oriole is a most handsome bird. The male, with his striking gold and yellow plumage relieved by the black wings, and the female, a duller more greenish version of her mate, are distinctly pleasing to the eyes. What is not so nice about them is their sound-box. It is true that one seldom has double-strings to his bows and what is pleasing to the eyes need not necessarily be pleasing to the ears, but surely that harsh croaking sound is most unfortunate, especially proceeding from the throat of a bird otherwise so uniformly splendid. Still, the hen bird seems to think much of her spouse's song and she happily joins in and the pair perform much duets together. Then they set about the onerous duties of building a neat little nest in the crotch of some scrubby tree, or suspended from the tip of a thin bough of some leafy forest monarch and, so protected from harm, they lay their eggs, hatch them out and produce very endearing little miniatures of themselves. A male Golden Oriole, with his olive branches in tow is a most comical sight. There he goes, hopping from branch to branch; and there too go the stubby-tailed little orioles, hopping just like father, occasionally tripping over their feet and having to flap their little wings hard to regain balance –the while teetering between falling and standing...

It may sometimes happen that the novice will mistake a male Common Iora with one of these birds – it is with a sense of some shame that I confess I was myself once guilty of this misidentification. I plead excuse however in the fact that I was very young then (both in age and in identification skills); though I often get chafed for this *faux pas*, and I have never really managed to live it down yet.

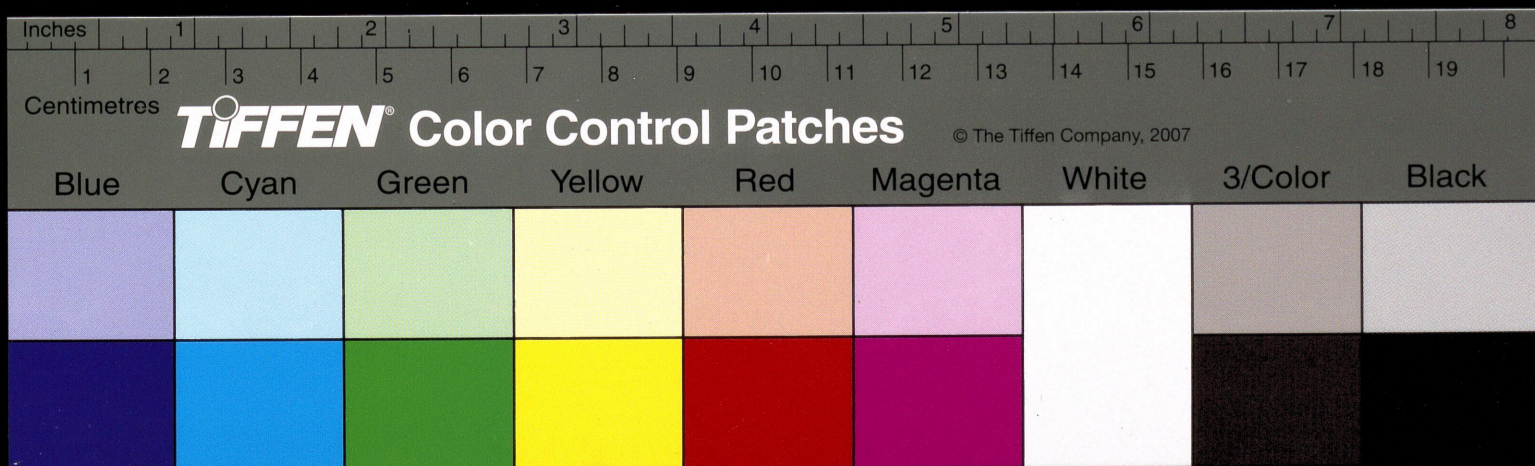
I have seen these birds nesting in the heart of the city, and far away from it. I recollect a nest sighting in Sanjivayya Park, which is right in the heart of the city. True that the nest was

overshadowed and passed over in the light of the discovery of a Pied Myna nest on the same tree – but it was there; and the hen was incubating as well. I noted that she never strayed far from the nest. Occasionally the male came and relieved her, but her idea of relief was a quick aerial sortie, a hasty bite at a caterpillar or a moth, and then back home to her brood. A model housewife, I thought her to be...

The other nest I saw was in Chilkur. Suspended on the end of a thin bough of a tree near the EEC, I was first attracted to the nest by the sight of the cock bird flying in and relieving his mate of her duties. Here too, the hen was a most conscientious mother – she made one brief swoop through the trees and was back at her post. The cock rubbed beaks with her and then flew off while she settled herself back on her eggs with, doubtless, a sigh of relief.

In Madras, at the Crocodile Bank near Mahabalipuram, there was an instance when the loud shrieking of Orioles brought me out in a hurry. A green Vine Snake was making its way towards the nest of these birds. The beady eyes of the snake were fixed intently on its target and it had eyes and ears for nothing else – not that it has ears in the first place anyway. However, so intent was the snake on the nest that it completely failed to take the adult birds into account and that was its undoing. The hen landed on the snake's back and pecked away vigorously; so startling the snake that he promptly lost his balance and fell to earth, he knew not where... Directly below the oriole nest was a large crocodile enclosure, and the snake fell straight into the pond. Fortunately for it, there was only one crocodile in that particular enclosure and that one was lying out basking in the sun. This enabled the Vine Snake to make a quick getaway and I don't think it went anywhere near that particular nest again. This told me that the Orioles can be exceedingly bold birds when they have to be. A bird that can attack a snake that is partial to birds as a large part of its diet is no ordinary bird. It argues a stout heart and a boldness of nature that it would be hard to overpraise.

The chap that visited the balcony had some interesting things to do. To start with, he decided that the bits of fruit lying in the buffet tray were not to his taste. So he gave those up and then proceeded to give a very passable imitation of a mouse as he nosed around in the corners of the walls, looking for midges or moths – though how he proposed to find them on the walls, he did not divulge to me. In his nosing, he came upon the potted shrub and discovered a caterpillar thereon, which he philosophically picked up, banged around a bit and then swallowed. A poor offering for so splendid a bird, but he was used to these things and took them in his stride. Having made quite certain that there were no more caterpillars around, he then nosed around a bit more, peered up at me with vague interest as I sat there beaming down at him, thought a bit about exploring under my chair, decided against it and then helped himself to a drink of water and flew off to the mango tree from whence he had originally come. No other



bird that has ever landed on my balcony has made me feel so completely humble and ashamed that I had not proper food to offer them. Maybe I should take a leaf out of the Oriole's book and make some arrangement to keep a supply of moths or caterpillars available at the food tray!

I don't think that many people will know that the cousin of these birds, the Blackheaded Oriole is also sometimes seen. However, be it mentioned that this other chap is mostly a

forest species and will not condescend to visit the garden or the balcony food tray. It believes, not without reason, that the best way to avoid getting endangered is to stay away from danger. Very sensible of him, I must admit; though it pains me that I have never really managed to get a good eyeful of this chap. But then, hope springs eternal...

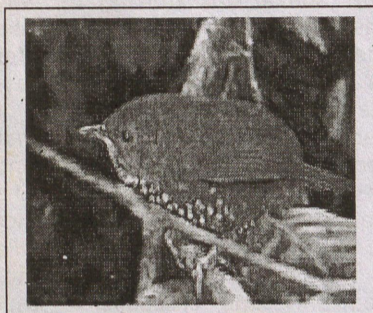
So this month, eat plenty of mangoes, and keep watching the Golden Oriole. Until next month, Happy Birding...!!

## CLIPPINGS

### Wren-babbler found after 50 years

18-05-2005

**O**n 18 November 2004 Ben King and Julian P. Donahue rediscovered the Rusty-throated Wren-Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis* in India's Arunachal Pradesh region. The species had not previously seen for more than fifty years.



Babbler *Spelaeornis caudatus* - its responses were recorded and played back, with excellent results.

The wren-babbler was refound at an elevation of 6,000 feet (1,800 m) on the Roing-Hunli road, in the Dibang River drainage of the Mishmi Hills, eastern Himalaya. The bird initially responded to a tape-recording of its nearest relative, the Rufous-throated Wren-

Rusty-throated Wren-Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis* was described by Ripley in 1948, based upon a unique female specimen mist-netted by the Ripley party on 5 January 1947 at an elevation of 5,100 feet (1,545 m) at Dreyi, on the Lohit River drainage of the Mishmi Hills. There had been no additional records or field observations of the species for almost 58 years until now.

"We had little difficulty locating the furtive, active bird, from its vocalisations and the movement of the dense roadside undergrowth, but it took an hour of effort to observe enough 'pieces' of the bird to conclusively identify it." —Julian P. Donahue

The team subsequently learned that the species is easily located (but exruciatingly difficult to observe) on the roadside between Roing and Hunli, on both the north and south sides of Mayodia Pass (elev. 2,655 m), in broadleaf evergreen forest at elevations of 5,100–7,700 feet (1,545–2,330 m); one day they elicited responses from seven different birds along just one kilometer of road.

The species is currently classified by BirdLife as Vulnerable.

By **Julian P. Donahue**

### Mysterious birds of Assam keep plunging to death.

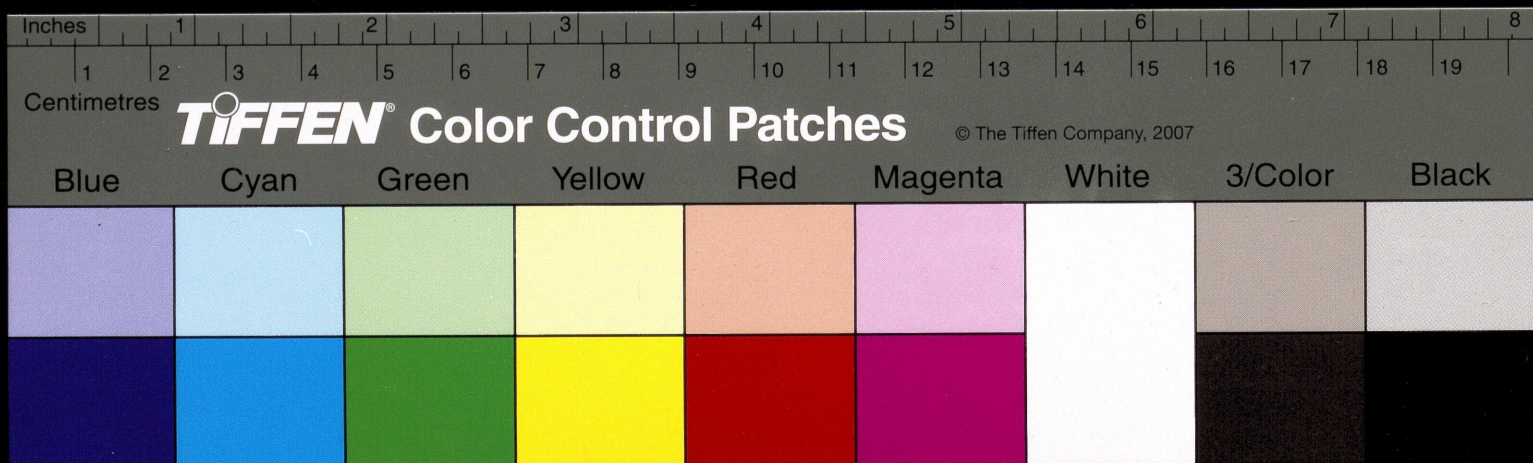
**J**atinga, India [AFP] -- A bizarre phenomenon of flocks of birds committing "suicide" in this remote village in India's northeastern state of Assam has foxed experts and the strange behaviour remains a mystery.

From August to October, when the night is moonless and foggy, accompanied by wind and drizzle, Jatinga, a village on a ridge in the North Cachar Hills district, 334 km south of Assam's capital Guwahati, turns into an island of searchlights and lanterns. Armed with catapults and bamboo poles, groups of villagers assemble outside their homes almost every night with torch flames and lanterns hung overhead, waiting for the "dying birds." And in no time, the slopes and hills of Jatinga buzz with the twitter of species of birds in agony, plummeting to the ground like ghosts from nowhere.

For almost three hours until midnight, the tiny hamlet becomes a nightmare for a bevy of birds that come dashing to the light source to be captured and killed by villagers. Curiously, most of the birds do not attempt to fly away from the lights. They look dazed and dishevelled, almost traumatised by the experience. The villagers get going in no time, bringing down birds hovering around the light sources by a vigorous swing of the bamboo poles. They use catapults to shoot those in flight or those perching on trees and bushes nearby.

"In the past, the haul of one night sometimes reached 500 to 600 birds with around 200 as the maximum by one person," Heren Langthasa, a tribal villager said. "But now a single person in one night manage to catch 50 to 60 birds," Langthasa told AFP.

Legend has it that the Zemi Naga tribal villagers at Jatinga were the first to witness the phenomenon in the late 19th century when disoriented birds in their thousands flocked to a bonfire lit by the locals in a paddy field to scare away wild pigs. The experience frightened them, as they believed the birds were evil spirits



swooping down from the sky. Eventually the Zemi Naga tribe deserted Jatinga.

The Jaintias, another tribe which moved to Jatinga in 1905, stumbled on the phenomenon while going into the hills at night with flaming torches to round up cattle. The bamboo torches attracted showers of birds, which the Jaintias regarded as a "god-sent gift."

Experts say that up to 50 species of birds get killed, including the Tiger Bittern, Black Bittern, Little Egret, Pond Heron, Indian Pitta and Kingfishers. The experts however say the birds do not commit suicide but are killed by villagers under circumstances not yet fully explained.

"The birds get caught in the fog, get disoriented at their roost by the very high velocity of wind. It is highly probable that the birds come towards the light sources set up by the villagers for refuge and in the process get killed or captured," said Anwaruddin Choudhury, author of "The Birds of Assam." "However, the entire phenomenon still continues to be a mystery, but it is a fallacy that birds commit suicide in Jatinga," he told AFP.

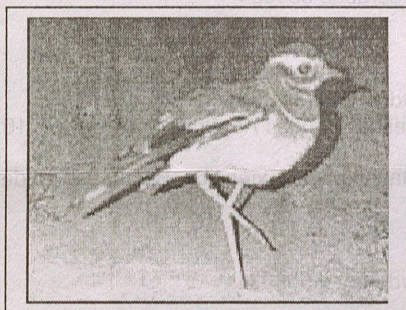
Local people are beginning to become aware of the need to conserve the bird population, experts say.

"We must create awareness about the danger of the entire bird species getting wiped out if the villagers continue enticing birds with torch flames and then eating the flesh," said H.C. Khersa, a teacher at Jatinga.

Most of the 2,000 villagers at Jatinga are farmers growing citrus fruits, mainly oranges.

### 'Voice box' to track Indian bird

The technology that gives cuddly toys their life-like sounds is being used to locate one of the world's rarest birds.



The Jerdon's courser lives in a tiny area of Andhra Pradesh in India and is seen so infrequently that hardly anything is known about its behaviour.

But now the UK's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has had noise boxes made up that mimic the animal's call.

Hundreds of park rangers will be given a box and a photograph and asked to report any sightings to ornithologists.

#### At night

A recording of the Jerdon's courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*) - the only one in existence - was made by Simon Wooton during a five-week field trip in one of the remotest parts of India.

"We had to see the bird and hear it at the same time to make sure we had the right call," he told BBC News Online.

"We saw it for about a second. Luckily, it called in flight, so we knew it was the right call." Wooton's group tried to track the bird, but lost it almost as quickly as they found it.

The courser was first identified by Dr Jerdon, a surgeon who travelled and wrote extensively about Indian wildlife in the middle of the 19th Century.

There have only ever been a handful of sightings. Indeed, so little is known about the bird that it was thought to be extinct for 80 years.

Then, one of the many teams that went to Andhra Pradesh to look for it discovered the animal was nocturnal.

#### Kew idea

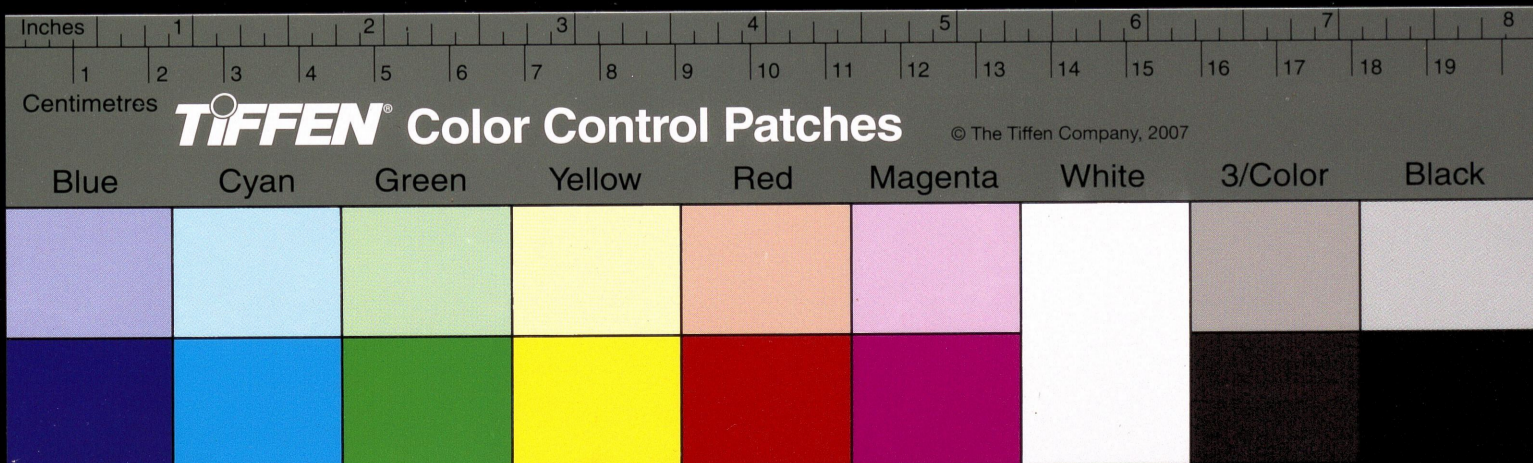
Dr Rhys Green, an RSPB zoologist, was trying to find a novel way to increase awareness about the courser in India when an idea came to him while wandering around a gift shop in the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, London.

He came across a cuddly toy which makes a lifelike bird sound. "If we could take the box that makes the sound out and reprogramme it with the sound of the courser, we could use it as an educational tool," he said.

He asked the manufacturers if they could re-work the "voice box" to incorporate the Jerdon's call, and now the little devices, packaged up with a photo of the bird, are on their way to Andhra Pradesh.

It is hoped the boxes will help conservationists track the courser, thus discovering more about one of the world's most elusive birds.

By Sarah Mukherjee



## BIRD OF THE MONTH

Pied Crested Cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*)

The **Pied Crested Cuckoo** (*Clamator jacobinus*) is a common woodland migrant bird and is generally met with in gardens and orchards within the city limits itself. Though they are more at home in wooded areas, they do tend to stray into large gardens where there are shady trees. Their distinctive call is more noticeable than the birds themselves.



The Pied Crested Cuckoo is often associated with the coming of the rains. There is the certainty that a sighting of this bird generally means that the rains are imminent, if they have not arrived already. Members of the BSAP are aware that, within 21 days of the first sighting of this bird, the monsoon will break. Whether the vagaries of the weather these days still allow the bird to function as so reliable a pointer remains to be seen, but there is no doubt that it is still a fair indicator of the coming of the monsoons. This function makes the sighting of this bird always very pleasant.

With their distinctive black-and-white plumage, which gives the birds their common name, the bird is quite unmistakable as far as their identification is concerned. The perky crest and the pied plumage gives away this pigeon-sized (though slimmer) bird. In the monsoons, the bird is quite spread out as far as its range is concerned. They spread throughout the Indian sub-continent and are met with in the hills of the ghats as well as in the plains. They are known to be brood parasitic on the Babbler family and are generally found in numbers in those areas where the Babblers are known to nest. There are also records of their offspring having been found in the nests of Wren-warblers; though how they are able to fit into these tiny nests is a wonder.

The birds seen in Southern India are thought to be members of the Southern African race (where the species is known as the **Jacobin Cuckoo**). Loss of habitat is causing some problems in the populations of these birds. There are fewer being noted now than were seen in earlier years. What the exact problem is, is not yet clear. These birds are sometimes seen in the cages of the bird markets, so it is certain that there is a small trade in them. How much this is causing the population decline needs to be studied.

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I, Aasheesh Pittie, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Hyderabad, 26 February 2004

Sd. Aasheesh Pittie (Signature of Publisher)

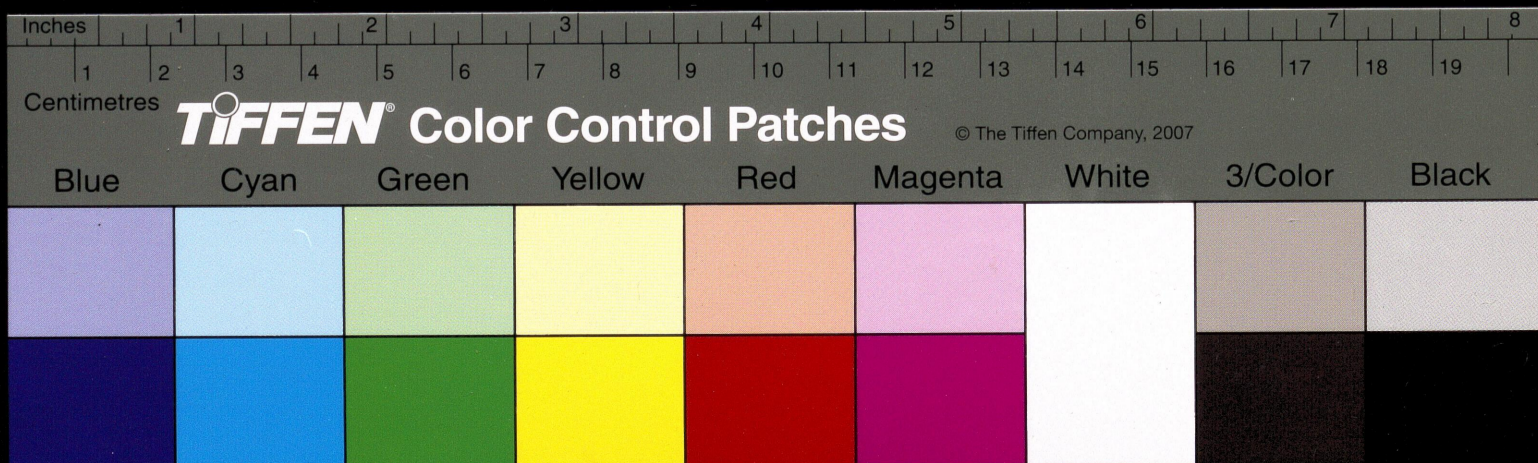
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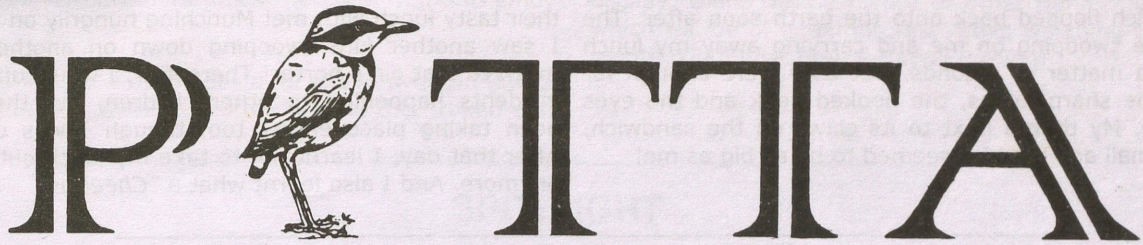
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Editors: Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher, Aasheesh Pittie.

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

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### Field Outings

#### Sunday, 14-viii-2005: Chilkur Deer Park, Hyderabad

Route: Mehdiapatnam: Langar House: A P Police Academy. Meet at the venue by 6.45 a.m. This will be a half-day trip. Chilkur is very rich in small woodland birds. There should be lots of warblers and some flycatchers around as well. For those who love those LBJ's, it's absolute paradise! The youngsters will have lots of Chital to look at – maybe the odd Sambar will also appear. The Orioles near the EEC should have their youngsters hatched and out of the nest by now. Similarly also the Spotted Munia that nests right at the entrance of the EEC. Keep an eye open for snakes – there should be quite a few Checkered Keelbacks near the ponds, and Vine Snakes in the bushes.

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

### Indoor Meeting

#### Monday, 22-viii-2005: Vidyaranya School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad

Annual General Meeting of the Society. Please refer to notice given below.

For further details contact **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)** or **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)**

## NEWS & NOTES

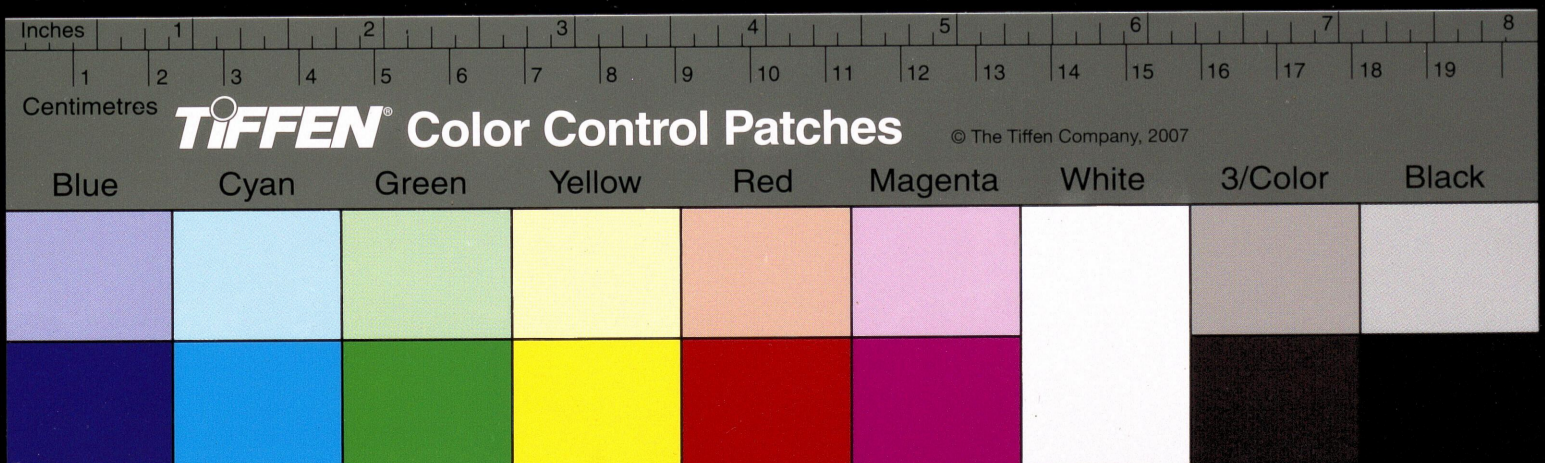
### A CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE BIRD KIND

By Sharada Annamaraju

This is with reference to the article on the Pariah Kite, published in the Society's bulletin – Pitta in May 2005, by the City BirdBrain, in the column Urban Birding. The author mentions an incident between a fishmonger and a kite, where the kite makes off with a few fish and the fishmonger is left fuming. The author goes on to mention in the third paragraph, that youngsters would be warned against carrying foodstuff out in the open, as there was the possibility of kites swooping in on the children and carrying the food away. Now, I would like to share an incident that took place when I was 6 years old (Year 1992, place Vishakapatnam), and was studying in the first standard. I remember the incident vividly as that was a pretty scary encounter of the bird kind.

Everyday around our school lunch hour, the Black Kites would be there, sailing around in the skies above the school grounds.

We wouldn't notice them at other times of the day. But during the lunch hour, there would be quite a lot of them, some feeding on the morsels of food dropped carelessly by us school children on the ground. One such lunch hour my friends and me were lunching near our classroom in the shade of the porch. My mother had packed a single jam sandwich for me. I walked out with it from under the shade out onto the school ground, not heeding my friends' warnings of not eating out in the open, for there were the kites outside. I stood looking around the ground and had not yet bitten into the sandwich. All of a sudden my friends screamed out from behind me "Cheel". I didn't know what *cheel* meant and I still wasn't worried about their screams "Cheel, Sharada, Cheel...!" I looked back nonchalantly to enquire the reason for their yells and suddenly felt a tug at my sandwich. The girls screamed a final "Cheel!" I turned my head towards the sandwich and saw claws gripping it! I felt the flow of air created by the *Cheel's* wings beating down. I took one look at the *cheel's* brown head, yelled, let go of the sandwich and leapt back to the safety of the porch. The bird started flying away with the sandwich. It had probably not managed to grip it properly, or





his consumption. Whatever he does, he does well and enjoys it.

So this month, keep the eyes peeled for the Redvented Bulbuls and, even if you do not see them performing the Broken Wing

display, there will be plenty of other things that they will do which will be of equal interest. Keep watching the bulbuls this month. Until next time – Happy Birding!

## SPOTLIGHT

By Siraj A. Taher

### The Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*)

A young medical doctor attached to the East India Company was based in Nellore, in the then state of Madras/Mysore. He was fond of roaming in the plains and hills of the area and the surrounding districts. His name was Trevor Cavell Jerdon. One such outing in 1848 created history and immortalised the medico. Jerdon procured and recovered for science, a bird then named by E. Blyth as *Macrotarsius bitorquatus*, and named it after the man who first found it in the "hilly country above the Eastern Ghats by Nellore and Cuddapah", as the Jerdon's or Double-banded Courser. Subsequently the bird was recorded by W.T. Blanford from Sironcha on the banks of the Godavari river bordering Adilabad District, and near Bhadrachalam in Khammam District, in 1871. The last historical record of that period, is from Anantapur District in 1900, by Howard Campbell.

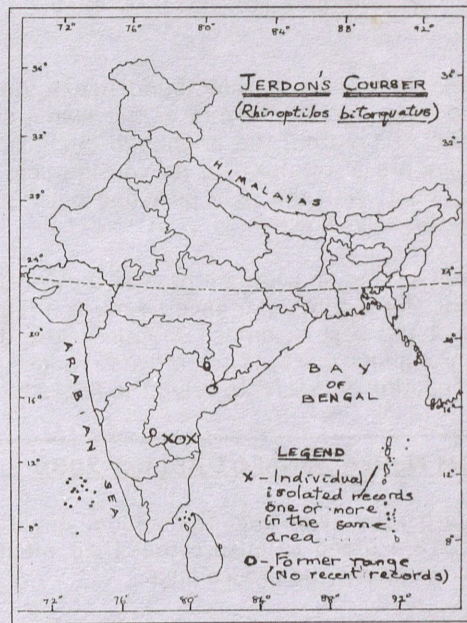
The Jerdon's or Double-banded Courser went through several scientific name changes from *Rhinoptilus* to *Cursorius* and then back to *Rhinoptilus*, creating quite a lot of doubt in the minds of taxonomists as to the true habits and behaviour of the bird. Jerdon's description of the Courser's habitat was very sketchy and there was not very much to fall back upon from the records of either Blanford or Campbell.

Concerted efforts from time to time included the Hyderabad State Ornithological Survey and the Vernay Survey of the Eastern Ghats. Neither procured any more specimens, or could add to the knowledge of the birds' habitat or behaviour.

With very little information in the true natural habitat or behaviour of this Courser, and a restricted area to search for, the scientists and all others looking for it were running into a blank wall for almost eighty years. It was only when the bird was assumed to be possibly related to the *Rhinoptilus* species of Southern Africa, a name which it carried in the 1930's, both by J.L. Peters (1943) and later by Howard Moore (1980), that some headway was made.

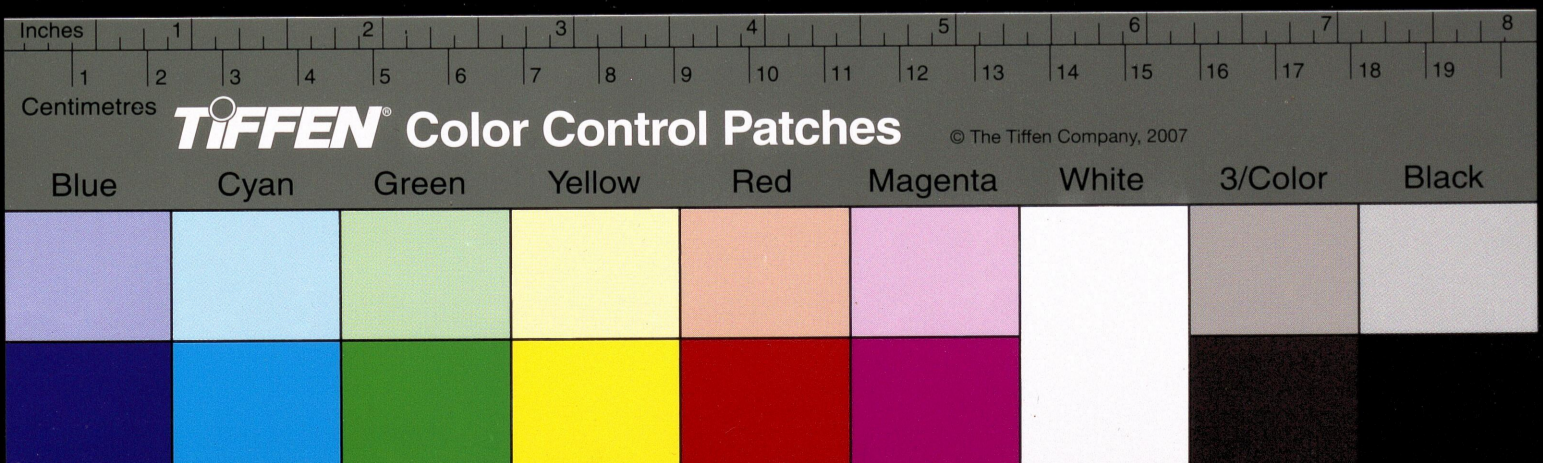
The three races of *Rhinoptilus* in Africa were all nocturnal birds, so there was a strong possibility that the Jerdon's Courser also may well be a nocturnal bird. And so it proved to be, when finally the bird was procured from Reddipalli village in Cuddapah District, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1986. *Voila!* The bird had been found! Dr. Bharat Bhushan, who was working as a Field Naturalist for the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) on their Endangered Species Project, along with the late Dr. Salim Ali as the Principal Investigator, was the person who managed to find the Jerdon's Double-banded Courser with the help of local Yanadi tribal bird trappers. One of these trappers, himself a

nocturnal shikari, called Aitanna even confirmed the bird's nocturnal behaviour. Finally, it was this same man who actually trapped the bird. Even the local names had changed from Adavi Utta-Titti (Jungle Lapwing / Stammerer), possibly a description of the call; to the present telugu name Kalivi Kodi (Kalivi = *Carissa* bush, Kodi = hen), as it was basically found amidst the thorny *Carissa* bushes, which abounded in its habitat, along with *Acacia* and *Zizyphus*. The first bird, which subsequently died, is now a prized specimen at the BNHS museum.



The Jerdon's Courser is a bird of dry scrub jungle, now known to be nocturnal, seen either solitary or in pairs. It is not very vocal, having an almost plaintive cry "be...be...be...be...bebe". It is exclusively endemic to the southern region of the Indian sub-continent, Andhra Pradesh to be particular. It is scarce, or extremely rare. Recent isolated records of this bird are from small areas of Kadapa District of Andhra Pradesh, while stray records of its former range were from the districts of Anantapur, Nellore, Khammam and Adilabad, (Sironcha, now in Madhya Pradesh).

Studies have been undertaken by the BNHS under a project sponsored by the Darwin Institute, U.K. and some encouraging results have been obtained by the study teams. Very recently permission has been granted by the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department and the Department of



Environment, Government of India to use a radio chip for more advanced studies to determine the birds' numbers, behaviour, movements and nesting.

The Jerdon's Courser is a typical brown-coloured courser, but with huge eyes, with a broad supercilium, short yellow bill with

black tip and striking brown and white double bands across the breast. Only extensive field studies may show whether the birds in the Lankamalleswara wildlife sanctuary, or any other area nearby, have viable populations or whether we have only succeeded in temporarily halting the march of these birds into oblivion.

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

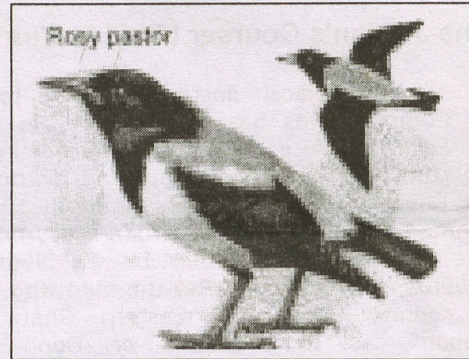
### THE ROSY PASTOR (*Sturnus roseus*)

**T**he **Rosy Pastor** (*Sturnus roseus*) is a rosy pink myna-like bird with a black head and crown, neck and upper breast. The wings and the tail are also black. The birds arrive in large flocks during the winter, when they are abundant in the North-Western portions of the country and the Deccan. In the Hyderabad region, large flocks are seen in thinly cultivated areas and scrub jungle.

This bird is one of the earliest of our winter visitors. The flocks begin to sweep in around the end of July, so there should be some around now. They stay with us almost upto April; quite obviously they do not like the dry heat of the Deccan.

These birds used to be seen in abundance in Vanasthalipuram deer park, when the Palas trees are in bloom. They appeared to have a fancy for the flowers of the Flame-of-the-forest trees and could be generally seen all over the trees, hungrily sucking the nectar from the bright red blooms. They are beneficial to farmers as locusts form a large part of their diet – though they are also known to do considerable damage in the *jowar* fields. A large flock, at work on the Palas trees is a wonderful sight, with the rosy pink and black plumage of the birds showing up in vivid contrast to the bright orange-red blooms of the Palas flowers.

These birds are not so common now as they once used to be. The numbers appear to have dwindled now and those flocks of 500 or more birds that were once so much a feature to the Vanasthali deer park have now dwindled to no more than about 50 or 60 at the best of times. Doubtless, the destruction of the habitat and the subsequent persecution has reduced the species throughout much of its erstwhile range. Protection is needed, and needed urgently, to ensure the continued survival of these beautiful birds and to bring the flocks back in again.



#### 2<sup>nd</sup> AGM Notice Dated 01 August 2005

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held on **Monday 22nd August 2005**. All members are urged to ensure that their membership fees is paid up for the current year, failing which they would be ineligible to attend the proceedings.

The agenda of the AGM would be:

- 1) President's Report
- 2) Secretary's Report
- 3) Treasurer's Report
- 4) Appointment of Auditors
- 5) Elections of Office Bearers (please see above)
- 6) Election of Executive Committee Members (Members desirous of serving on the committee, please give their names to the Hon. Secretary)
- 7) Any other Business

Please treat this as official intimation of the Annual General Meeting and ensure that you are eligible and available to attend the same.

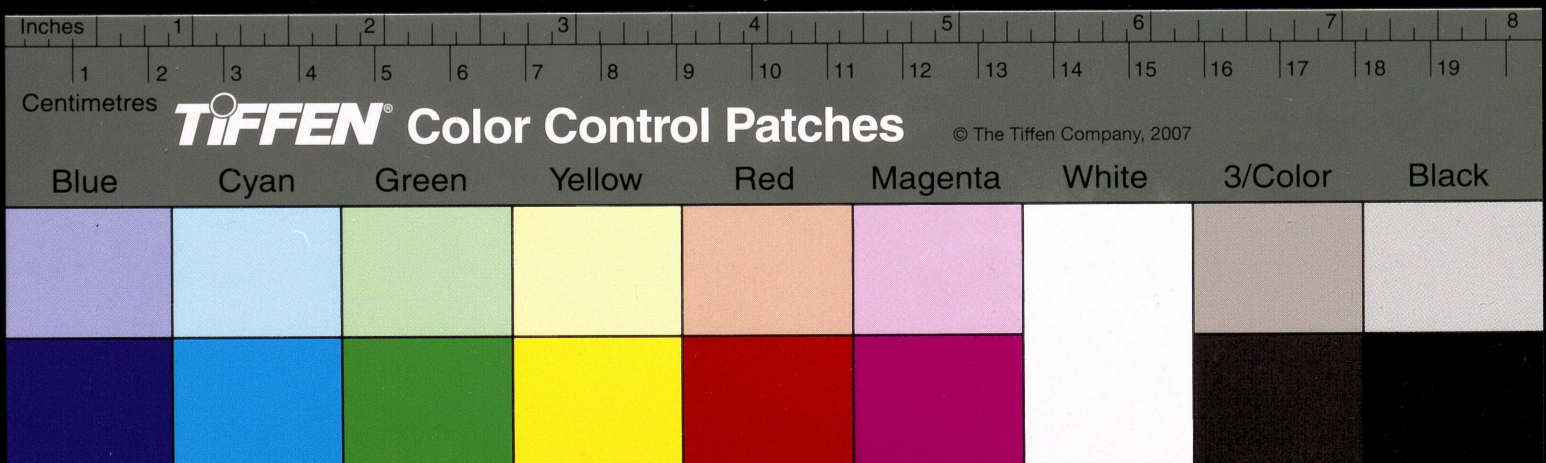
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Editors: Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher.

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

Membership (Rs): Admission=100; Annual=200; Student=100 per annum. Life=2,000. Add Rs.25/- for outstation cheques.



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Donations to the Society are exempt from tax u/s 80G(5)(vi) of I.T. Act, 1961.

## Field Outings

### Sunday, 25-ix-2005: Rouriyal Tank, Rangareddi District

Route Charminar – Barkas – Pahadi Shareef. After 12 – 13 km., take the first left turn after Pahadi Shareef and drive on for 5 km. to the tank, which is on the right hand side of the road. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 – 7.30 a.m. There should be lots of migrants around at this time of the year, with the waterfowl already in in impressive numbers. Added attractions here are the Crested Honey Buzzards that are always to be seen in the area, and used to nest in a large tree near the tank. There are sure to be some ducks, such as Pintails and Widgeons around, maybe even a few Barheaded Geese. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

## Indoor Meeting

### Monday, 19-ix-2005; 6.30 p.m.: Vidyaranya School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad

Audio-visual presentation on Bird flights and Aircrafts by Dr. Narasimhachari, Retd. Professor of Zoology; Kakatiya University.

For further details contact **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)** or **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)**

## NEWS & NOTES

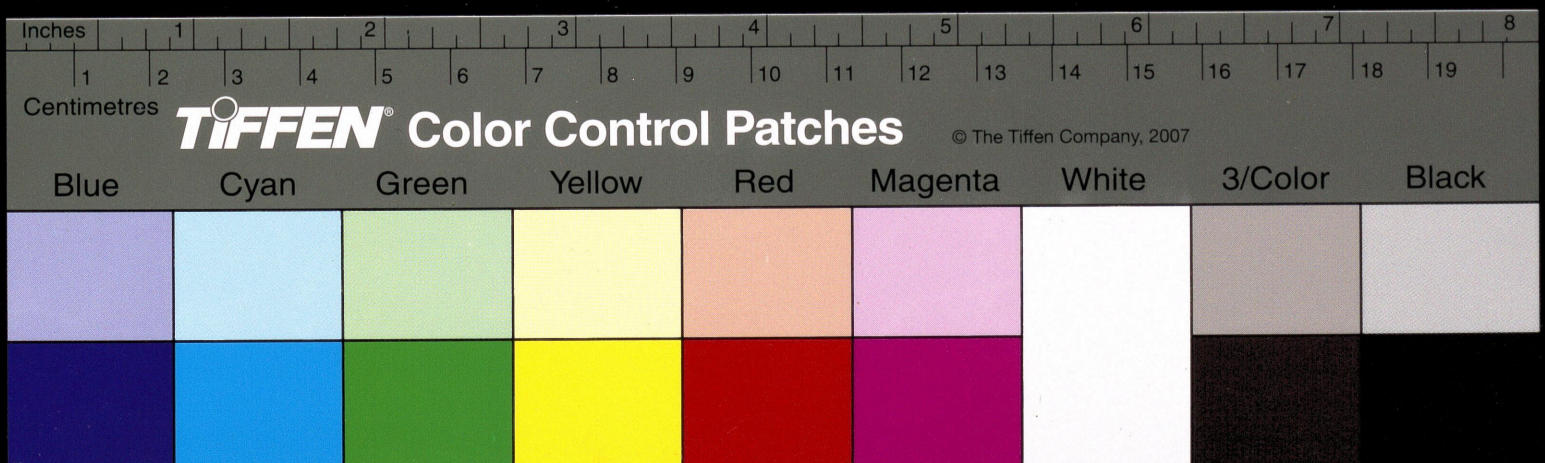
### FIELD TRIP TO CHILKUR DEER PARK (14<sup>th</sup> August 2005) – Happenings of the Society

By Arjun Surendra

Our arrival at the park gate, was heralded by two Grey Partridges (*Francolinus pondicerianus*), which gave us a fly past salute. On closer inspection of the gate we found, much to our chagrin, that it was locked. We did however, manage to spot the watchman lazing about on his chair. After rendering ourselves hoarse, we were able to attract his attention and rouse him out of his early morning reverie. Well, finally the gates were opened. The delay at the gate however, gave us an opportunity to do some birding. We managed to see a Tree pie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*) and a Redvented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*). We parked the car and waited for the others to arrive. During this time we had a couple of interesting sightings. A Common Grey Hornbill (*Tockus birostris*) was spotted. One sighting puzzled us for a little while though, we saw a bird that was half hidden in the

grass. This turned out to be a Large Grey Babbler (*Turdoides malcolmi*).

The attendance was taken and there were twenty people present. We split into two groups and headed out with our respective guides. One of the first things we saw was a male Small Minivet (*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*) perched atop a tree. The angle of the sun was just right to highlight the beautiful orange-crimson breast. It was joined by the female and they soon flew off together. A Franklin's Wren-Warbler (*Prinia hodgsonii*) was spotted. Some members of our party saw a herd of Spotted Deer. We were planning to head towards the watch tower when our guide got us lost, we climbed rocks to try and spot the tower, but the foliage was too thick. We then decided to retrace our steps and see if we could locate the elusive tower. We could hear a Redwattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) and finally we did manage to see it. As we were walking toward a small pond we saw two birds fly past. One of them was a Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) and the other a Small Pratincole. Further ahead, at another largish pond we saw a pair of Spotbill Ducks (*Anas poecilorhyncha*)



that took off on seeing us. Suddenly we spotted the watchtower right behind the pond. Heaving a sigh of relief we set off toward it. En route we managed to spot a Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*) and a female Purple Sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*). Finally having reached the tower, we took a much needed break. The watch tower provided us with an excellent view of the park. Here we met up with the other group and exchanged notes. Their sightings included a Thickbilled Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum agile*), Tickell's Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*), Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), a Fantail Flycatcher, Purplerumped Sunbird (*Nectarinia Zeylonica*)

Refreshed by our break, we decided to head back. On our way back, while we were walking on a bund, we spotted a Coppersmith (*Megalaima haemacephala*) high up on a tree, and a glimpse at another pair of Small Minivets. We also saw a Tickell's Flowerpecker. This area seemed rich in birdlife, next trip maybe one could just sit there for a bit and watch. Further on, an Iora (*Aegithina tiphia*) was also spotted.

All through our outing, many calls were heard. But the birds were hidden in the thick green cover and did not deem us worthy enough to grant us an audience.

## A TRIP TO NAGARHOLE NATIONAL PARK

By Mrs. Gool R. Plumber

Nagarhole and Bandipur National Parks together cover a little over 1500 sq. km., of which Nagarhole covers 645 sq. km. Its official name is Rajiv Gandhi National Park. These two parks, along with Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu, and the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala, form a contiguous wildlife habitat. The river Kabini flows through Nagarhole and, on the other side of the river, the Bandipur National Park is visible. The Kabini river subsequently joins the river Cauvery. Nagarhole, in the local language, means "Snake River", after which the Park is named. The jungle stretches between the Western Ghats on one side, and the lovely Nilgiri Hills on the other. They support a rich array of wildlife - from herds of Asiatic Elephants to the majestic Tiger.

My husband and I stayed for 3 nights (from 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> May), in the Kapila Resort. This resort is about 1 km. from the Kabini River Lodge. It is spread over a large area and has small colonial type bungalows which are well maintained. Our bungalow faced the Kabini River and had four spacious rooms - double rooms with covered verandah, overlooking the river. There are four such bungalows with a central open spacious restaurant for meals. The service is good and the staff is courteous and willing to give information. Most of the staff are young and, though Kannada is the most prevalent language, most of them, especially the jeep drivers, know English.

The manager, Mr. Vikram is a quiet, helpful person; well-versed in wildlife and has books and other material on nature. My husband, who is an avid reader preferred to spend his time on the verandah reading a fascinating book from Mr. Vikram's collection. He did not join the safaris except on the first evening. But he found much peace and harmony in nature, sitting on the verandah and reading, or walking along the river bank facing our bungalow.

The resort offers a good array of nourishing vegetarian food and the fresh air sharpened our appetites so that both of us enjoyed the food, relishing also the ambience of the place. During dinner, they had log fires burning and the pathways back to the bungalow were well lit with low, covered lights.

During our stay, we had three different families staying in the other wing of the bungalow and, on the last day, an American

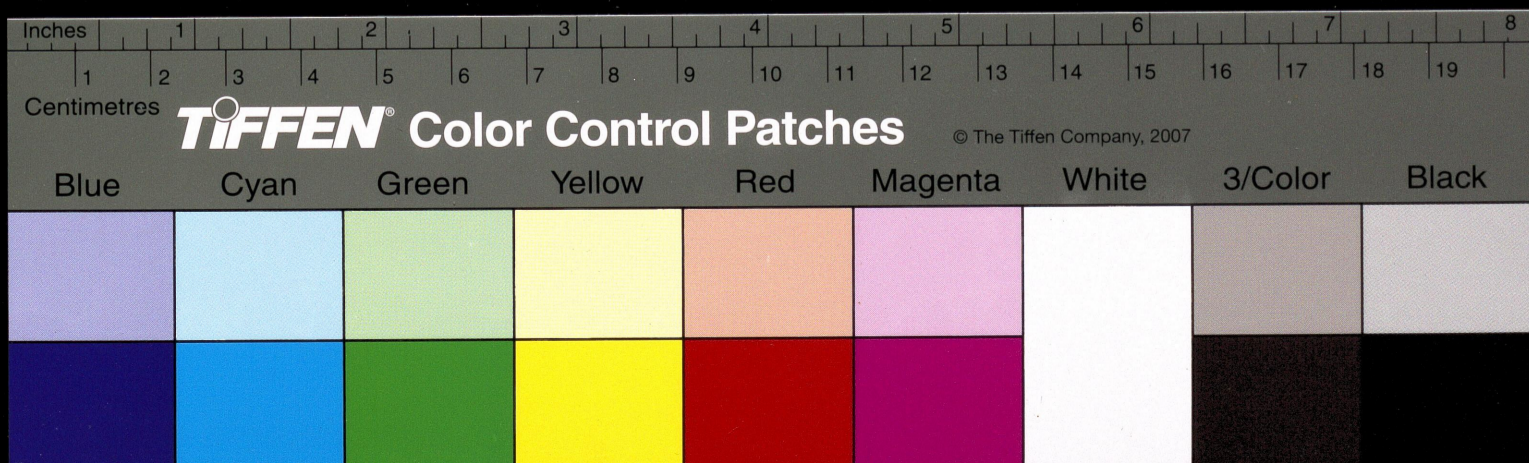
software engineer stayed in the room next to us. These were the people along with me, who were taken on jeep safaris twice a day - in the morning from 6.30 a.m. to almost 9 a.m. and in the evening from 4 p.m. to about 6.45 p.m. The best part of our visit to Nagarhole were these safaris and I went six times during our stay. The drivers are young and have keen eyesight for spotting wildlife even from a long distance. They are also very familiar with the flora and know all the tracks, watch towers, and which are the best spots to see wildlife.

In the park, we saw giant Bamboo groves and for the first time, I saw such luxuriant growth of Bamboos. We saw teak in some areas of the forest and, within the precincts of the lodge, we saw young Sandalwood trees. As it was May, the trees were bare in some parts, but I could spot Indian Laburnums, Indian Coral Trees and Red Silk Cotton trees (they were already bare of blossoms). We also saw Lantana bushes along some of the pathways.

Coming to wildlife, we were thrilled to see herds of wild Elephants along the Kabini river bank in the evenings and during the morning safaris in the bamboo thickets. This was not an uncommon sight. Between Nagarhole and Bandipur forests, there are about 5000 elephants, and the forest provides them with grass, bamboo, waterholes and the river. Though we could not spot tiger or panther, the jeep attender and driver showed us clear pug marks of both these cats, which are naturally shy and secretive.

Two major herbivores seen were many small herds of Gaur and herds of Spotted Deer (Chital). Both these species were quite common. The Gaur are strong and muscular, but gentle and quiet animals. They were generally spotted along grass patches in the forest, and similar patches on the river banks. The bulls are darker than the cows, but their deep brown coat with the white socks make them very conspicuous. Chital are much commoner in these forests and I was amazed at the size of some of the herds we encountered.

There is a close relationship between Chital and Langur monkeys. We saw the monkeys on the lower branches of trees, giving warning calls to the deer on seeing our jeep, and the herd would quickly scamper away into the bushes. Amongst the animals, Langur are perhaps the most alert. It



was a delight to watch them swing through the trees with such grace; and they also provided many opportunities to observe their behaviour.

The other animals we spotted were small groups of wild boar and wild dogs. Mongoose and grey squirrels were often seen on the forest floor. Twice, our driver spotted Malabar Giant Squirrels high up in the forest canopy, and it was a wonderful sight, as we could not have spotted them on our own.

Nagarhole is also a paradise for birds and the following list of birds were seen on most of the safari trips:

Indian Roller; Hoopoe; Goldenbacked Woodpecker; Brainfever Bird; Myna; Peafowl; Jungle Fowl; Redwattled Lapwings; Cormorants; Little Egret; Large Egret; Kingfisher; Pond Heron; Black Ibis; Coucal; Snake Eagle; Large Pied Wagtail; Little Brown Dove; Fish Owl; Jungle Crow; Racquet-Tailed Drongo;

Babblers; Painted Stork; Black-rumped Flameback Woodpecker; Crested Hawk-Eagle (nest); Sparrows; Bee-eater; Sunbird; Baybacked Shrike; Indian Robin; Bulbul.

Of these, the Indian Roller, Hoopoe and Mynas were common. On our morning safaris, the jungle resounded with bird calls and those of Langur and Peafowl. These were glorious moments and I thanked God for His creation and he staff, who have preserved these forests.

On the last day, we learnt that forest officers were involved in elephant counts in Nagarhole. There are seven watch towers near the waterholes and there are always two men there to keep a watch.

One thing we noticed was large logs of wood and plenty of dead trees along the tracks. (*Is this a disturbing sign - Editor*).

## BIRDS OF A CITY PARK

By Siraj A. Taher

Situated along the main road in Banjara Hills, it was once a small, natural lake with a few houses surrounding it. During a better part of the year the water level was good. Marshes and reeds added to the charm of the lake, and migratory ducks, besides the regular resident species, occasionally frequented it. A stray fowler would not be averse to taking a shot at them during the season. As time passed, and small houses started coming up all over the surrounding areas, this wonderful scene changed and the lake became dry; and continued to be so for several years. Then, a few years back, a nice park was laid up here, with lawns, trees, of course a canteen and playing area for the children, with the lake as the centre of attraction. Of course, the marshes and reeds were there, but so was boating and cemented embankments.

For sometime, no water birds could be seen except some Pond Herons and a few Little Egrets. This year I happened to visit the park fairly regularly to take my grand-daughter to play there, and I beheld that the lake was abuzz with waterbirds - Coots, Waterhens, Egrets, Swallows and Swifts, Ducks (both domesticated and wild), and a few Geese.

I started to feed bread to the domestic ducks and geese and one day, a Coot swam down from a clump of reeds, picked up a few pieces of bread and frantically waded and half-flew back into the reeds. It came back a few minutes later for more food. I then realised it was carrying the bread back for its young amongst the reeds. Soon another Coot joined it, and my granddaughter and I were enjoying throwing pieces of bread to be picked up by the Coots. All this time, the feral ducks and geese were merrily feeding on the bread pieces thrown in the water, frequently chasing away the coots.

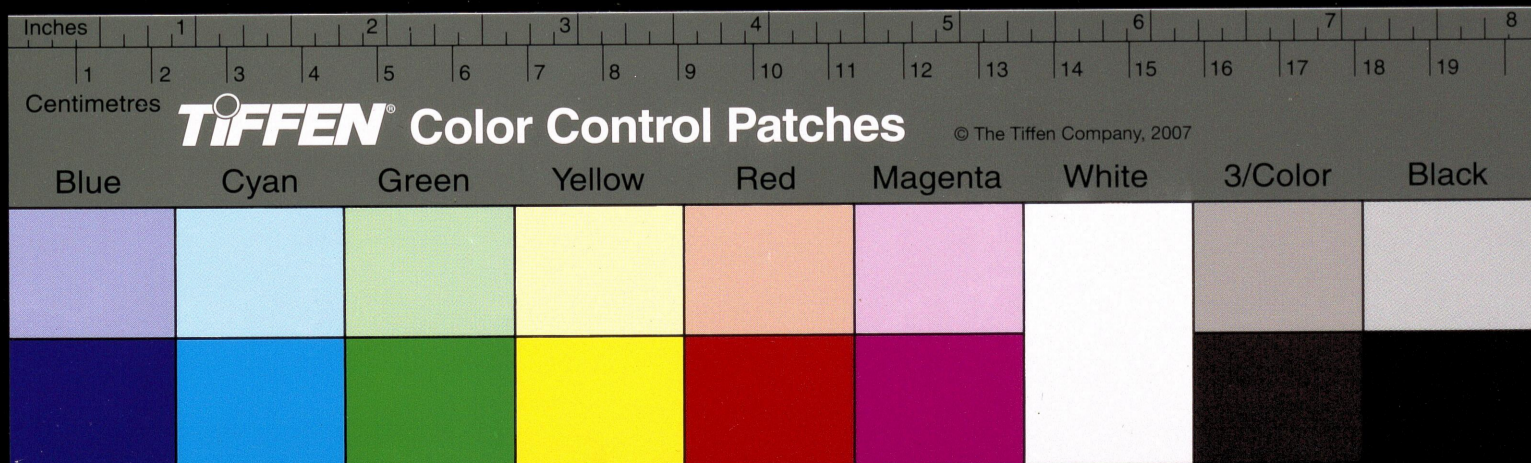
A few weeks later, the parent coots had five chicks following them. In mid-June I observed chicks of the Whitebreasted Waterhen and two parents showing the same behaviour; and two days later, a pair of Spotbill Ducks with a flotilla of seven chicks also came up to the water's edge for feeding with the other birds on the bread. All this was very delightful for me, but also very sad that these waterbirds could not find enough food for their young on the ponds. Will I see them next year also...?

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### THE INDIAN TAILOR BIRD (*Orthotomus sutorius*)

The **Tailor Bird** (*Orthotomus sutorius*) is a jaunty little olive green bird with white underparts, rusty crown and two elongated pinpointed feathers in the tail. They inhabit scrub country, near cultivation, gardens, wooded areas and deciduous jungle. They are found throughout the Indian subcontinent but are absent in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

This bird is a resident species and is familiar and confiding. It is equally at home in outlying scrub jungle as in gardens and shrubbery in the heart of a city. It is known to fearlessly enter verandahs of even occupied houses, hopping amongst the creepers and potted plants, within a few feet of the inmates, giving vent to its



loud cheerful trilling call. They are fond of tiny insects, their eggs and grubs and also have a partiality to flower nectar.

Five races are thought to occur in the subcontinent. All of them are adept in the sewing of leaves of trees to construct their very clever nests. Selecting some tree with large leaves, such as teak or wild almond, the birds will either fold over a single leaf and stitch it along the edges or, if not able to find trees with such large leaves, they are equally skilled in stitching together two or three leaves of other trees. The funnel is then lined with soft fibres, cotton and vegetable down, and the eggs are laid therein.

There is reason to suppose that these birds have suffered less in the current mass urbanisation. Since they are able to adapt to small gardens and scrub areas, the populations, though dwindling, are not very discouraging. The birds are seen nesting in areas such as the large municipal parks within the city, and also in shady gardens where such still exist. Still, it would be well to ensure that the population is indeed stable – some dedicated work is required to be done here to ensure that there is still a viable population left of these birds in the area.

## MY FIRST BARN OWL

By Humayun Taher

There is something magical about working late in the nights, even if it be in the surrounds of the concrete jungle. Objects that are only too clear during the daylight hours take on ghostly shapes when viewed in those velvet hours between dusk and dawn. Even an object as innocuous as a dead coconut palm can look strangely eerie after dark. The proper habits of *Homo sapiens* are all related to the day. At night, without the sanctuary of bright lights, a human being is a mere apology. He is afraid, mortally afraid and powerless in the dark!

And yet, this magical time is utilised by other beings of this world. Who has not heard the eerie chatter of the Spotted Owlets from the nearby trees. Or the haunting boom of the Great Horned Owl often startles those more blessed with natural areas around their homes, as he sails through the night skies on his lawful business. If gifted with sharp hearing, the little squeaks of the pipistrelle as it hawks insects, reminds us that there are other mammals that also thrive in the nights.

Yet another denizen of the dark hours is the Barn Owl. And, a few days ago, in the heart of the city, just a stone's throw away from the Hyderabad International Airport, I was privileged to see one – a ghostly shadow in the darkness, a sudden flurry of wings in the night, and there alighted on a window ledge a veritable phantom of the night. It sat there, looking over its shoulder onto the busy street below; and then turned those huge eyes straight into mine. There were black pools of thought behind those eyes: If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then the soul of the Barn Owl is deep and awesome. There are illimitable jungles in those eyes, and the power and wisdom to bring them into the ken of the bird! I had a strange hypnotic feeling that the bird was not only able to see me, but was also able to read my thoughts much better than I could read his.

All this took much less time than it takes to tell. Whether, it disapproved of my stare, or whether it had business elsewhere, I

cannot tell; but the bird suddenly took off and vanished into the darkness from whence it had come. I caught a glimpse of the silhouette as it crossed the street, and then the dark swallowed up the phantom as though it had never been there at all. All I had, to remember it, was the memory of those brilliant golden eyes. And then I remembered something else also – that this was the very first time I had seen a wild Barn Owl. I have seen them in other places, it is true. Twice have I seen them in the cages in the bird market. On one occasion, in long ago days, there came two of these birds to the house, in a wire cage of rough manufacture – props for a horror movie, they were; and the producer, having no further use for these birds, brought them and handed them over to the then secretary of the BSAP. Malnourished, exhausted and plain terrified, one of the birds did not survive the night. The other was stronger, and he at least made it through the night – though I do not know if he made it to the end!

All I can think of is that, if more people were given the grace to stare into the eyes of an Owl, they would probably emerge from the encounter as better and stronger people, with more understanding of the world we share. Do I sound anthropomorphic – maybe... But blame it on the hypnotism of the owl's eyes. They make you think, believe me. Think about our place in the world – and the ridiculous inventions we make to ensure that the dark does not frighten us. And then still continue to be afraid to go and see why the lights are not working.

At the end, if I were given the grace to return to earth in a form of my choosing, I may well opt for an owl. No matter if people do call me "ullu"; at least I will have the opportunity to get to know better those velvet hours between twilight and dawn, that are denied to the human intruder!

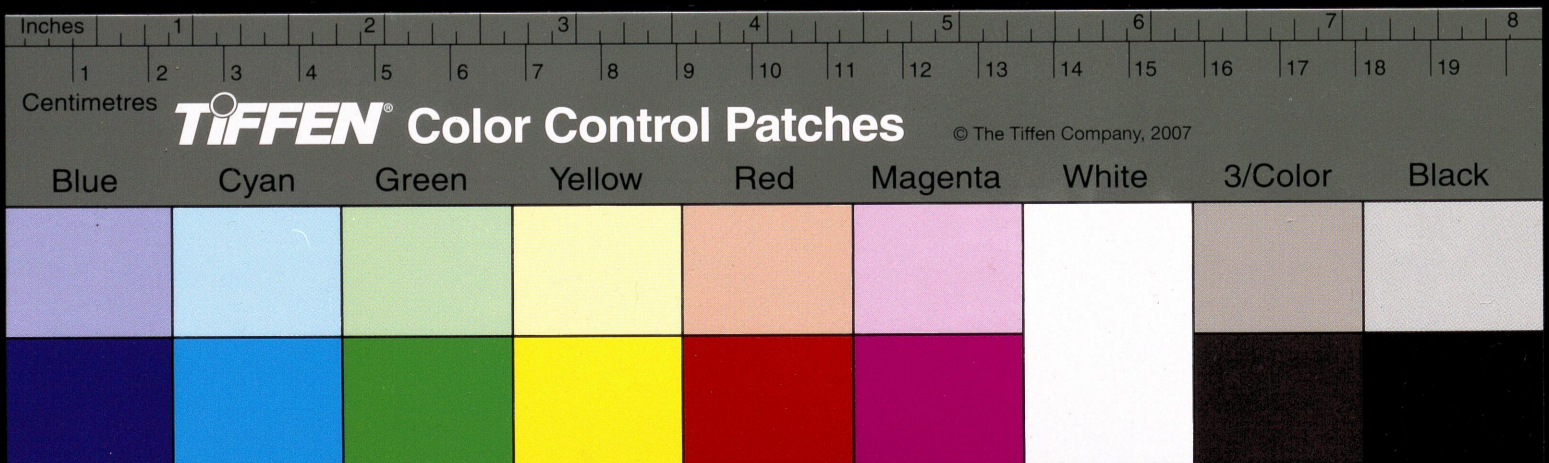
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Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

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## Field Outings

### Sunday, 23-x-2005: Narsapur Reserve Forest, Medak District

Route Balanagar – Dundigal Airforce Base. Meet near the temple on the side of the road. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 – 7.30 a.m. There should be some woodland migrants around now. Narsapur is rich in woodpeckers and these should be added attractions. Both species of Chloropsis and possibly Spangled Drongo. Added attractions here are the Brown Fish Owls that are sometimes seen near the lake. The lake also almost always has a flock of Indian River Terns. There may also be some ducks, such as Pintails and Common Teal around. This will be a full-day trip. Carry water and packed lunches. For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

## NEWS & NOTES

### FIELD TRIP TO ROURIYAL TANK (25<sup>th</sup> September 2005) – Happenings of the Society

By Humayun Taher

Never would I have believed that a slight shower of rain would have the effect of quelling the ardour of the avid twitcher. The age of birdwatching seems to be dying out! One wonders where those hardy souls are, that ventured forth armed with mackintoshes and plastic bags carefully draped over their binoculars, to peer excitedly at little birds, dimly visible through the drizzle. Yet, to my unbounded amazement, this is exactly what did not happen.

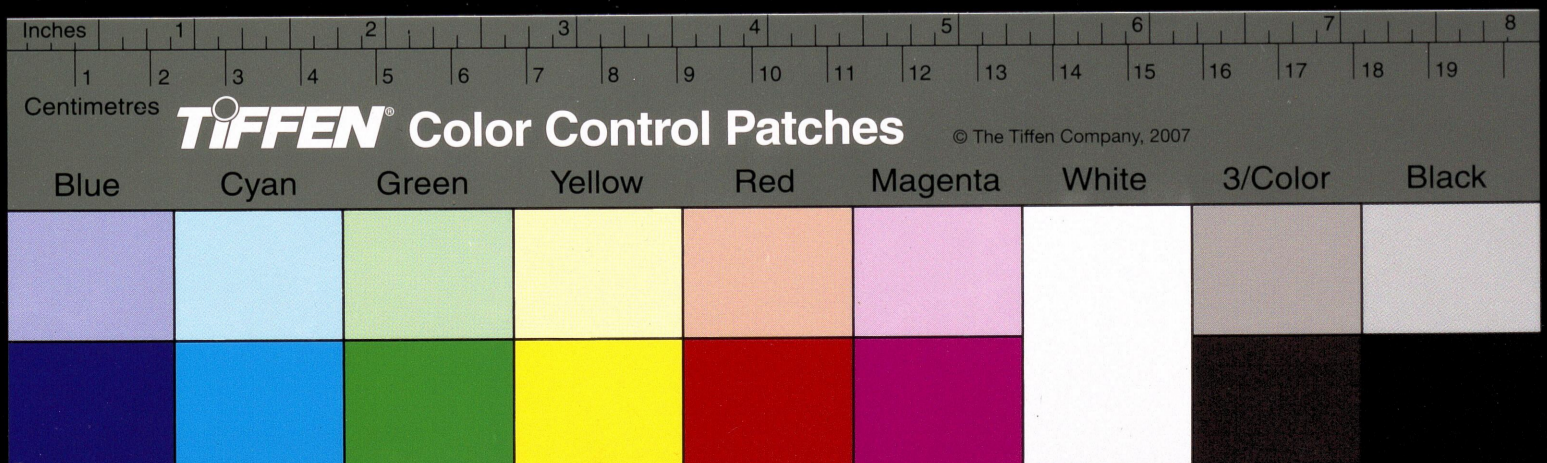
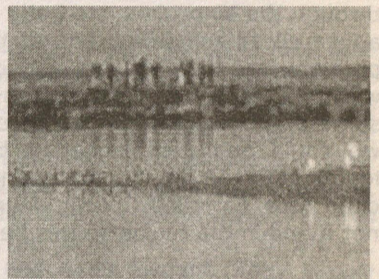
Reaching Punjagutta cross-roads well before the scheduled kick-off at 6.30, my father and myself waited... and waited... and waited some more. Finally, we decided that either we have chosen the wrong date, or that something is the matter. A couple of phone calls elicited the information that most of the members who were supposed to turn up had turned down because it was apparently raining. I grant that there was a slight drizzle, but surely not enough to warrant the cancellation of the trip.

Nothing daunted, we decided that if the rest of the members are not forthcoming, we will go ourselves. Shafaat Ulla Saab decided to accompany us, and the three of us set out at

around 7.30 or so. Strangely enough, almost as soon as we started, the rain slackened and eventually stopped and, by the time we reached Rouriyal, the sun was back in action and shining strong.

Reaching the waterbody was rather saddening as there was hardly any water there at all. A couple of shallow puddles was all that remained of the once-full lake where we had even seen Barheaded Geese in the days of long-ago. And of waterbirds there was not a sign. The only ones we could see were a couple of Black Ibis, a few Little Cormorants and Pond Herons. In the fields nearby, we saw several Cattle Egrets, but I doubt if these can be included in true waterbirds category.

Having parked the car near the bund, we started to walk along it to see what transpired. There was a herd of cattle in the fields adjoining the lake and, in attendance on these, we saw several Cattle Egrets and a few Common Mynas. Peering at the Mynas through the binoculars, we were able to spot a pair of Pied Starlings also feeding on the ground. This was interesting because even though it is apparent that Pied Starlings have moved into the Hyderabad region, they are still not birds that



are met with everyday. So we stood there and exclaimed over the birds which nonchalantly continued their feeding.

Continuing along the bund, we notched up a few Redvented Bulbuls, Whiteheaded Babblers and Roseringed Parakeets. A family of Mynas alighted on an electricity pole nearby and the antics of the stubby-tailed youngster brought a smile to the lips as it sat there, teetering gently in the breeze, seemingly almost on the point of falling but never quite getting there. Further up, we encountered other small birds of the bushlands. Ashy Wren Warblers were sporting in the bushes, accompanied by Tailor Birds, singing raucously in the bushes. There were also a few other little chaps around, but I am hopeless at identifying these LBJ's and prefer to put them down in the list just as LBJ's and have done with it! Sorting out the length of the third primary feather and the thickness of the beaks is not for me – and I have no hesitation in admitting it.

Swallows and Swifts sported in the air. One of the Common Swallows flew so close that we were able to see a small loose feather in the snowy-white shirt front! The spotless white plumage would have made a detergent manufacturer weep with joy!

Further up there was a surprise. We were watching a half-dozen or so Redwattled Lapwings running around in the fields when a large wader appeared. It alighted at the water's edge but was immediately set upon by a nearby Pond Heron. Taking fright at this attack, the wader swerved off and landed on a small patch of unattended shallow water. He immediately proceeded to wade around in the water which, at times, came almost up to his belly, so that he gave a very curious impression of actually swimming. We peered at the chap through the binoculars and hotly contested identity. At times it appeared as something and at times as something else. The problem was that we were only carrying Collins pictorial guide with us. The other books were in the car, which was now quite some distance away. So we noted as many of the features as we could and then legged it back to the car to establish identity. Based on the notes and plumage, we identified the chap as a Bartailed Godwit. I understand that this species is not found in the region so this becomes a notable sighting.

Near the car, a trio of Indian Rollers was disporting in the air. Mindful of the fact that European Rollers are also sometimes to be seen in Hyderabad, we took a close look, but the birds were obviously Indian Rollers. A Black Drongo nearby watched these antics disapprovingly. An Iora called and Green Bee-eaters flashed around. A Pied Bush Chat put in an appearance, along with a couple of Indian Robins – causing some confusion. We were speculating on the absence of Shrikes when a Brown Shrike appeared; silencing our complaints.

Eventually, we decided to start back. Hot chicken patties and cool water and then into the car, headed for the village, where we hoped to find a *chaiwallah*. We were not disappointed in this and we found a chap who specialised not only in *chai*, but also in hot *mirchis*. Much refreshed, we headed back, being stopped en-route by a soaring Blackheaded Snake Eagle (Short-toed Eagle to the old timers...). Further up, we heard Painted Partridge calling. And that set the seal on the end. Not a great day's birding, but a wonderful day in the bush. If only

more people realized that weather is no deterrant to birding. In fact, rainy days bring out the best – and that itself is a great incentive not to miss a rainy day's birding.

**ANNUAL GENERAL BODY MEETING OF THE SOCIETY:  
Held on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2005, at Vidyaranya School, Hyderabad**

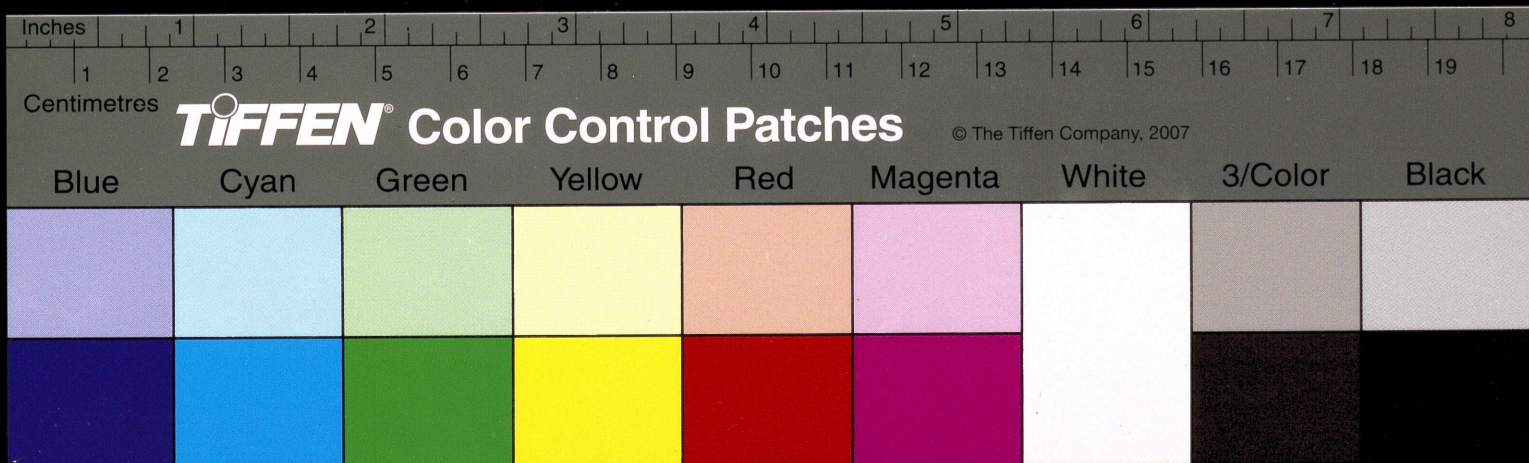
Members of the Society assembled at the Vidyaranya School at 6.00 p.m. Even at 6.30 p.m. the Quorum of members was not present so the meeting had to be adjourned under rule 26 of the Rules and Regulations of the Society. The meeting was again called to order after 15 minutes and, as per the rules, whatever the number of members present would constitute a proper Quorum.

The President gave his annual report of the work of the Society and also projected the future course of action that the Society and its members need to formulate to wake the society from its slumbers and to put it back on the rails. All the activities of the society, field trips, indoor meetings, lectures and slide shows seemed to have become individual efforts rather than member activities. As you can see, this month there is no indoor meeting and till such time as proper programmes can be planned and organised, the activities of the society would continue to decline. It is indeed sad to think that more than 25 years after its inception, the BSAP is still struggling with everything; whether it is organising field trips or indoor meetings or printing its newsletter PITTA, or the Journal MAYURA. If it goes on like this, there will not be much to write about or to do, and all the recognition and acclaim that the society has attained, and the real work put in, thanks to its hardworking, motivated and dedicated members would be in vain. It is a sad reflection that even for its AGM, a proper quorum was not present.

The meeting proper started and the society accepted with regret the resignation of four of its senior and active members. While Aasheesh Pittie, Raajeev Mathew and S. Ashok Kumar gave personal difficulties as the reason to continue as Executive Committee members, Kiran K. had left for the U.K. and was thus unable to serve on the EC. Four members were proposed for the E.C. and duly elected. They are C. Bhaskar Rao, Nand Kumar, Sheetal Vyas and Humayun Taher.

The Hon. Secretary gave a brief report and also the Hon. Treasurer presented the accounts. The meeting ended with thanks to Mr. Ram Babu, Vidyaranya School, the Auditors Gandhi and Gandhi, AP Forest Department and other project sponsors. The Auditors Gandhi and Gandhi have been again appointed for a further period of 2 years.

Project: The members were apprised of the ongoing Telugu translation work given to the society, for translating the book BIRDS OF SOUTHERN INDIA, by Grimmett, R; Inskipp, C and Inskipp, T. The work is almost over and the manuscripts have to be put on CD and sent for final printing.



The Executive Committee again met at the house of Susheel Kapadia on 2.10.2005. The following office bearers have been elected:

- |                    |                |
|--------------------|----------------|
| 1) Siraj A. Taher  | President      |
| 2) M. Shafaat Ulla | Vice-President |
| 3) C. Bhaskar Rao  | Hon. Secretary |
| 4) Susheel Kapadia | Hon. Treasurer |

Sheetal Vyas was proposed for handling the programmes of the society in the media and she accepted this and agreed to do the work. Nand Kumar, M.S. Kulkarni and J.V.D. Moorty would look after the procuring of funds for society projects. Siraj A. Taher agreed to take up the matter of arranging for Indoor Meetings as and when they are planned.

## Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

I'm not quite sure if the species that I propose to discuss in this episode can qualify for an urban species. However, since the name of the bird is suggestive of such, perhaps I can be excused for taking it as an urban species. Besides, I happen to have seen a small flock the other day, hawking insects quite happily in the late evenings, in the vicinity of the office. So we will devote this month to the study of that interesting bird, the House Swift.

These are most entertaining birds. In appearance, they resemble little bows, complete with arrows fitted! And their tiny beaks are forever questing for midges, flies and other assorted insect life. All day, they are on the wing, in quest of various delicacies that would appeal to the gourmet House Swift. And now that they seem to have moved into the city, they appear to have a still greater variety in their diet. One disadvantage of this is, of course, that they have to put up with a considerable amount of pollution. But they are willing to put up with it for the advantage of the variety in their diet.

The bill of these birds is a perfect apology, but their gape is very wide. It has to be, as they prefer to do most of their eating in the air. Such a habit, if performed by one with a small gape, would cause onlookers to raise their eyebrows at the appalling table manners. The House Swift solves the problem by maintaining a gape of considerable size and this appendage helps it to swallow its food in full flight without scandalizing onlookers with its table manners.

Not only is the bird very compact looking, its home too is cozy. They build under balconies and in small nooks and corners of old buildings. The nest is composed almost entirely of small feathers and straw and is held in place with the birds' saliva. The entrance is constructed between the wall and the nest cup. Here the birds line their home with soft down and raise a brood of huge gaped, ever-hungry chicks. How the parents manage to find enough time during the day to satisfy the appetite of their ever-hungry offspring is a mystery to me. But they seem to do it with remarkable aplomb.

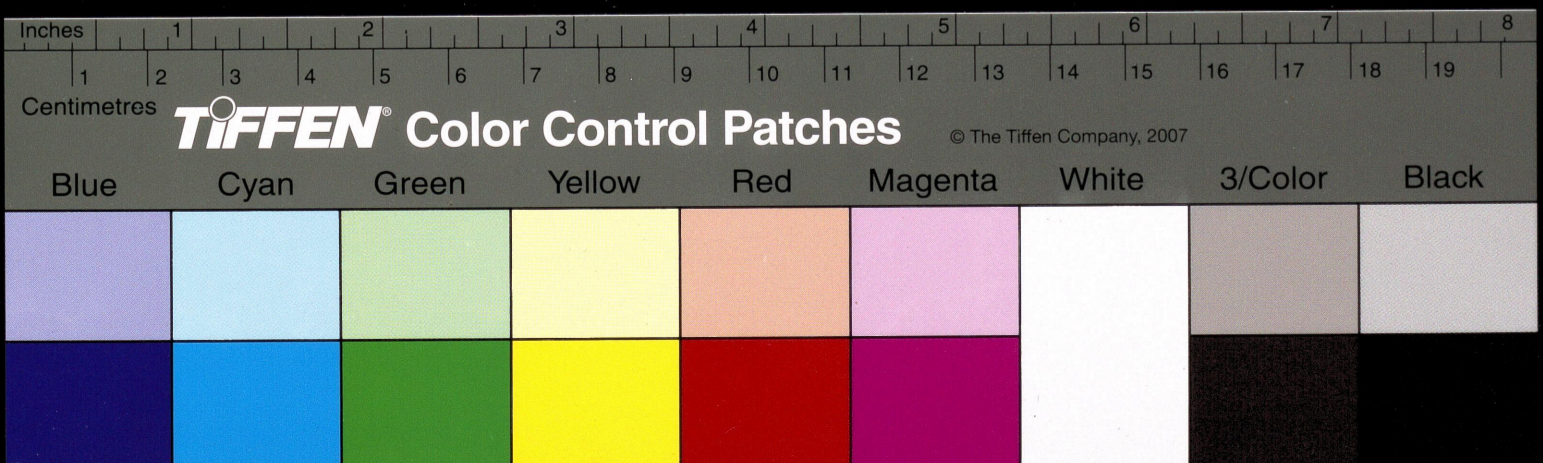
I remember in the days of long ago, when I was much younger than I am now, a House Swift was brought to the house. I cannot now recollect how it got here, but the problem with it was a broken wing. For a bird that survives entirely in a state of flight, this was a quite serious injury. Swifts spend almost the entire day on the wing, so the loss of one wing almost certainly means death for the bird. With us, perhaps it would have a chance of survival.

The first problem that presented itself was where to keep the bird. A Swift's feet are very strangely constructed. All four toes point forward. So the bird is incapable of perching in the true sense. We solved this problem by getting a cane-backed chair. Placing the bird on it, we found that it would cling to the cane webbing quite easily and, in this rather strange posture, it preferred to live. So that solved the problem of lodging. The boarding, however, was also a matter of some interest. How to feed it...? And what to feed it? Flies suggested themselves - there was a sugarcane juice vendor near the house and the crushed stalks of sugarcane attracted hundreds of flies. I invested in a couple of flyswats and made hourly visits to the sugarcane stall, where I swatted several dozen flies, much I may add, to the amusement of the vendor and his several customers, and carried them back in a small tin box and, with the aid of a pair of small tweezers, fed them to the bird, as it hung on the back of the chair. The bird eventually managed to get over its broken wing, but before we could find out if it would make a successful return to the wild, a cat had a very conclusive interview with it.

Since Swifts have very special feet, with all their four toes pointed forward, they cannot perch and they are therefore forced to hang from edges. Consequently, you will never see them perched on telegraph lines as do their cousins, the Swallows. This lends a certain amount of ungainliness to their appearance when at rest. But see the same bird on the wing, and you will never believe that it is the same chap that was hanging so precariously from the edge of the nest. In the air, a Swift is just that - swift and most elegant. They simply swim through the air!

Perhaps the major enemy of these birds is the Hobby. Other predators simply do not have the speed necessary to catch these birds, though they sometimes put in a few vain attempts. Having said that, there is a record of a Kestrel having caught a House Swift once. I wasn't there when this happened, but the incident was reported in a British birding magazine which, I regret to report, I seem to have mislaid and now I cannot even recall the name of the excellent journal. But generally speaking, even the Hobby has its work cut out in trying to catch one of these birds for its dinner. The Swifts are fast birds and are quite capable of outflying even this, the swiftest of the falcons.

There was a time when the nests of these birds were collected, to supply the Chinese kitchens with the ingredients for birds' nest soup. Chinese seem to specialise in delicacies that bring the natural world into grave danger! Be that as it



may, there is a species known as the Edible Swiftlet, whose nest is composed almost entirely of the saliva of the bird, and this is the most sought after ingredient for the soup. But in the absence of the nest of the Edible Swiftlet, other species' nests are equally eagerly sought. So the House Swift also suffered in this sort of poaching. The nests were collected with little regard for whether they supported young or not. Doubtless, if the nests contained young, the poachers would have found a use for them also of a culinary nature!

Even so, with all these dangers surrounding it, the Swifts go through life, twittering happily as they hawk the midges and moths that form their bill of fare. And if you have the time and the inclination, it is worth spending a few minutes watching their antics in the air. Keep watching the House Swift. Until next month - Happy Birding!!

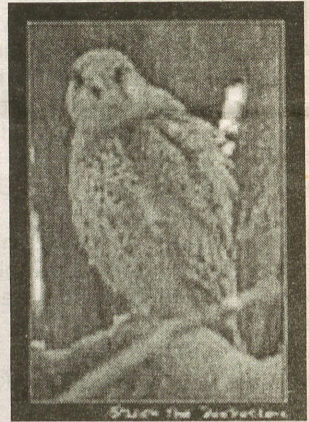
## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### THE KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*)

The Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) is the commonest of our falcons and, in the proper season, is seen in quite sizeable numbers in its chosen habitat of open country, with scattered trees and scrub. Also inhabits fields and grasslands. Here it hunts for locusts, field mice and lizards and the occasional small sickly or wounded bird.

Members of the BSAP have been doing some bird ringing of these birds for some years now. Although no reports have come in of recoveries from outside, there have been several of these birds ringed in the course of the three years in which the studies were conducted.

Several specimens of this bird have been kept in captivity from time-to-time and they are found to be a confiding species which rapidly lose their fear of man. Some of these captive specimens were trained to hunt and they proved to be fairly good at it, though the size of their prey was necessarily in keeping with their own small size. An interesting aspect is that none of the trained birds ever hunted by their normal wild method of hovering. Hovering appears to be a prerogative of only the wild birds. This hovering flight is very interesting to watch, as the bird is often seen almost suspended in one spot, only the tips of its wings rapidly beating.



A subspecies of this bird, the Indian Kestrel is supposed to be a resident of Southern India and Sri Lanka. However, there is no record of this race being seen in the Hyderabad region.

Loss of habitat is a prime reason for the decline of the species. Earlier, there used to be seen quantities of these birds in the Jubilee Hills area, but with the wholesale destruction of the rocks and scrub area which was the preferred habitat, the birds have declined significantly and now it is a very rare sight to see a Kestrel in areas where, but a few years ago, it was found in impressive numbers. Protection of the habitat is vital to the survival of these visitors to our shores. Another source of danger is the activities of trappers. There is a good market for birds of the hawk tribe, here in Hyderabad as we are often visited by Arab sheiks who value these birds for falconry. Even though the Kestrel is generally not used for serious falconry, yet it is a falcon and, as such, can be used for the purpose. Therefore, there is a market for them and, in the season, quite a few are to be seen in the cages of the bird market, where they command quite a fair price. This, coupled with the loss of their habitat and the scarcity of food, is making these birds much more uncommon than they once used to be. It is high time that people woke up to the fact that these birds are in grave danger, and try and do something about it.

The BSAP is planning to organise a field camp for five days to Dehra Dun via New Delhi, in the month of December. All interested members are requested to please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla on Tel.: (040) 2335 3098

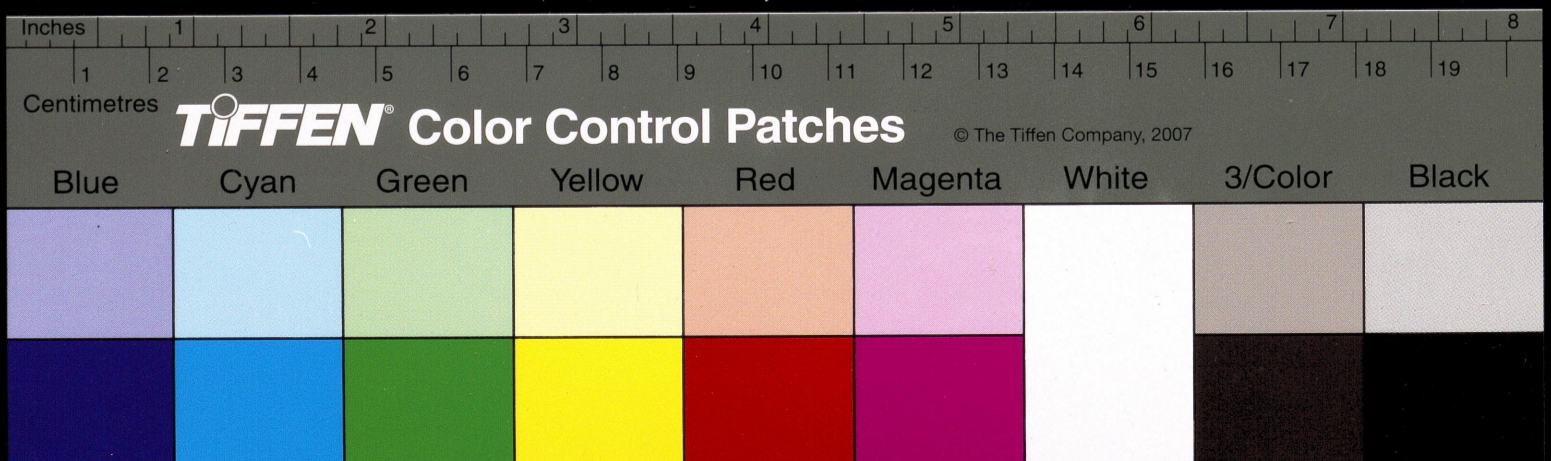
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For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

Editors: Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher.

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

Membership (Rs): Admission=100; Annual=200; Student=100 per annum. Life=2,000. Add Rs.25/- for outstation cheques.



# IP PITTA

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## Field Outings

### Sunday, 27-xi-2005: Shamirpet Deer Park and Lake, Medak District

Route Secunderabad Club - Trimulgherry. The Deer Park should provide an abundance of small woodland birds, while the lake should have at least a few waterfowl on it by this time. The rocks around the lake used to attract Peregrine Falcons but that was a long time ago and it is unlikely that this noble bird will be seen here now. But there should be some ducks like Pintail and Spotbills, provided that there is sufficient water in the lake. Look for Flycatchers and Warblers in the Deer Park. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

## Indoor Meeting

### Monday, 21-xi-2005; 6.30 p.m.: Vidyaranya School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad

Audio-visual presentation on The Darwinian Theory of the Evolution of Species: By Humayun Taher

For further details contact **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)** or **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)**

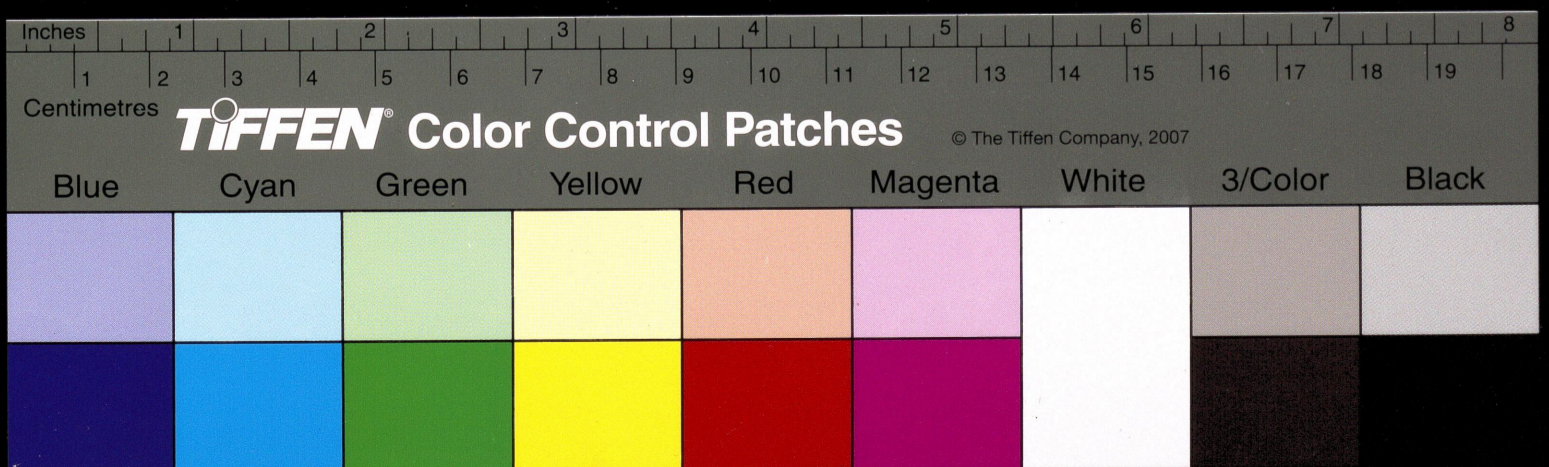
## EDITORIAL

### Society News - or the lack of it.

Sadly, it seems that the woeful conditions with regard to the Society news continue unchanged. Why is it that people are so hesitant to submit notes to the Pitta. I have said earlier in this column that the job of making the writers' efforts more professional is for the editor. But the editors cannot create the news events, that the members attend. This activity is in the hands of the members. I believe that there was a fair turnout for the Society field trip in October to Narsapur. And yet, no-one has thought it worthwhile to just pen down what happened on that day and send it in for inclusion. You may think that nothing worthwhile happened, or that none of the sightings were interesting. But if you do not report, then that will certainly be the case; whereas if you do report, it could happen that a few years down the line, there would be some data hidden in this report that would be worth talking about. Believe me, it has happened before and it could well happen again.

Fine, so the editor has no better things to do than to keep firing sarcasm at the readers for not writing. Believe me, the editor is definitely NOT wanting to be sarcastic. It is merely a strong appeal to the members that it reflects very poorly on the Society if we cannot even produce a newsletter that is all contributed to by the members. It is easy enough these days to get a whole book of stories from the internet and put them into Pitta. But where does that get us; it reduces the newsletter from the status of a NEWSLETTER to a mere Compilation of news that is not even strictly relevant to our area.

Is anyone out there listening? And willing to take steps to correct this state of affairs? And if anyone wants pointers on the "Art of Writing", invest in a copy of "The Common Birds of Bombay" by EHA. That will give you more lessons in the art of natural history writing than any textbook on the subject. Gerald Durrell too, would be wonderful for this purpose and he would probably be more readily available at the bookstores



than EHA. And if you can get hold of any of Lawrence Durrell's literary efforts – well, nothing else can even begin to compare.

So, who's going to be my first contributor to the news columns next month?

### Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

With the advent of the winters, several species of urban and suburban birds begin to bestir themselves and think longing thoughts of house and hearth. Along with this thought comes an awakening of the courtship instincts and, simultaneously, all the males burst into spontaneous song, in the time-honoured tradition of birds to acquire a mate and so procreate and continue the species. One of the first species to get into the act is that rather comical little fellow, the Spotted Munia. Very diminutive are they, but very vocal and, as they seem to be thrusting their attention on me through their loud trilling from the balcony – to remind me that there is a shortage of grain in the buffet tray – we will hasten first to charge the tray with grain and so to tell of Spotted Munias at the same time.

Despite their small size, these birds are extremely visible. We see them in places as diverse as the woodlands and, as like as not, in the farms where they forgather with their numerous other cousins and do battle on the grain crops; to the consternation and wrath of the farmer and the grain merchant alike. And they are equally at home in urban gardens or, as in my case, in the shelter of the balcony, in close attendance to the grain tray!

The appearance of these birds is distinctly pleasing to the eye: What with the scales on the breast and the chocolate brown plumage – both the hen and the cock sharing the same clothes – the pair cuts a natty figure against a backdrop of grey wall and green foliage. And coupled with this is the fact that they have very pleasant voices also. Not that they have a great repertoire, or that the song they sing is very pleasant; but what sounds they do produce are quite refreshing – mostly little twitters and cheeps as the hen and the cock lovingly peck at each others' faces and indulge in a little communal grooming.

In the old days, when we used to keep quantities of cage birds of the budgerigar and parakeet kind, Munias too were favoured for the cages; on account of their pleasant plumage and their cheerful twittering and trilling. EHA, one of the most interesting authors of British East India, has also commented on the cheerfulness produced by having a cageful of Munias in the veranda of the house. So far as I can remember, our birds were housed in a large cage some distance from the veranda, but their soundbox was loud enough for their twittering to carry to the said part of the house and that was sufficient to create a cheerful feeling in the house.

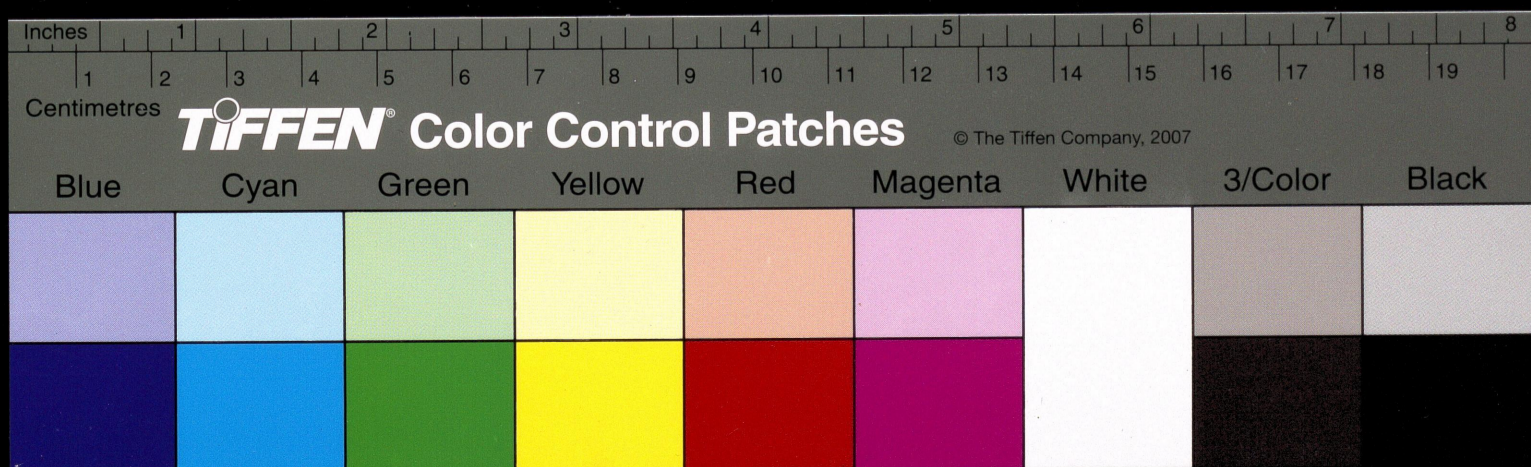
Though I confess to a sense of shame when I say this, there was a time when I used to use these birds as bait for catching hawks and falcons. I had a couple of them in a small wire cage to which were attached considerable number of nooses, and, when the hawk came to try and catch the birds, it invariably snared itself before it could do any damage to the birds

themselves. In fact, though I managed to catch 6 Kestrels in a single day once, not once was any of the Munias so much as scratched, though there were two Spotted and two White-throated in the cage. The gaps in the cage grill were just too small to allow the hawk to get its talons into the cage and catch them. What is interesting is that the birds did not die of shock – it speaks much about their hardiness.

A pair of Spotted Munias has been visiting the balcony food tray regularly. They generally arrive late in the evenings and hop around the balcony in the company of the Sparrows that are now swarming in impressive numbers to the balcony. They lend a certain amount of colour to the scene as they hop around, chirping cheerfully. The steam that rises from my teacup fascinates the hen. She has several times tried to stick her face into the cup to ascertain exactly what this strange phenomenon might be. Each time she tries, she gets a puff of hot steam in her nose which causes her to sneeze with some violence but, nothing daunted, she tries again once the sneezing fit is over. Her husband is a trifle better behaved and less curious, or perhaps more cautious – though it is interesting and touching to see how anxiously he looks towards his wife as she performs her curious antics with the steam, what appears to him to be dangerously close to my legs. Occasionally, I fancy that there is a reproachful look in his little black eyes and a faintly accusing note in his twittering – but this could be due to the over-active imagination that I rejoice in!

I remember seeing a pair of these birds attempting to build their nest in Chillkur deer park once. The pair had selected a small ashoka tree near the Environmental Education Centre for the purpose and they busily flew to and fro, carrying twigs, leaves and little bits of straw. We did a bit of work with stopwatch and binoculars at that time and discovered that the birds averaged one visit per minute to the nest. Based on this, of course, it was obvious that they added 60 twigs per minute to the nest being constructed. Further research would have involved pulling the nest to pieces and ascertaining how many hours the birds took to complete it. We were resolved to go back one day and collect the nest once the birds were through with it, but somehow this did not happen, and when next we saw the nest, it was again in use by the birds – an observation that prompts the question as to whether these birds are in the habit of reusing old nest sites. I personally feel that the nest was a secure place and there was little or no interruption so the birds found it convenient to re-use the nest.

What with the fact that the cook has stopped drying the grain outside, and that the housewife prefers to get her rice directly from the supermarket which obviates the necessity of cleaning it, the birds have less to attract them to urban gardens now than they previously had. Which brings us back to the question of whether they deserve the tag of urban birds at all





🌐 **Birds:** One branch of the reptiles evolved into birds. Originally feathers were probably evolved from scales as a form of insulation and temperature control. The evolution of feathers led to flight. It is possible that the first birds were not very good fliers. *Archaeopteryx* is assumed to be a very weak flyer and probably only took wing when seriously threatened.

🌐 **Mammals:** Although reptiles were the first vertebrates to conquer the land completely, their cold-blooded bodies could not adapt to all environments, particularly the Polar Regions. Warm-blooded mammals then evolved to fill in these niches, and now mammals

cover almost all the regions and habitats that the earth has to offer, from the tropical areas to the polar regions, from the fresh-water lakes to the seas, from the highest mountains to the plains.

🌐 **Primates:** Starting around 65 million years ago, a small group of mammals evolved with large brains and dexterous hands; these are the early primates which culminated in monkeys, apes and ultimately, about 400,000 years ago, into modern man, *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### THE SPOTBILL DUCK (*Anas poecilorhyncha*)

**T**he **Spotbill Duck** (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) is one of our larger ducks and one of only a few resident species. They will be seen throughout the year on small and large jheels, lakes and reservoirs. Of recent years, they have also moved into the city and are seen in parks and gardens which have waterbodies in or around them. The public park on Banjara Hills Road No. 1 (Vengal Rao Park) is a good example, which has a family of these birds in residence. The plumage is mostly brown and grey, with a white and metallic green speculum. The most prominent feature is the dark bill, tipped with yellow and with two dark orange spots at the base; one on each side of the forehead. This is a distinctive feature and one which gives the bird its name.



The birds are found throughout the Indian Union, including the Andamans and also in the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. There seems to be some local movement throughout its range, but this is not authenticated. Three races have been identified, but only the typical race concerns us here in Southern India.

In the days when *Shikar* was legal, this bird was a favourite for the table. This could have been because of its resident habits and the fact that it could be got even in the non-migratory season. The old man tells of the days of his youth, when this bird was a frequent star in the kitchens! In view of this, the species is most wary and very difficult to stalk up to, even to this day. An interesting example of adaptation enduring even when the prime cause no longer endures.

The birds build with us here, the main season being during the South-West Monsoon (July to September). There is a record by the BSAP of a nest in Chilkur, by the side of a small path, close to a small natural pond. Generally, the nest is a pad of grass and weeds on the marshy margins of tanks and lakes. There are records of young birds from Nehru Zoological Park and other places around the city. It is not unlikely that the birds nest in the Zoo, because there is an abundance of favoured habitat around the large lake near the Lion Safari Park.

At the same time, there is considerable persecution of these birds throughout the year. I recollect seeing them for sale at Sunday bazaars in the livestock section and there are generally one or two in the shops at the Chowk Bird Market. It seems that their reputation as good table birds still precedes them and, being resident, they are to be had throughout the year. It is high time that the birds are given the protection that they deserve. And I think it is time that we too resorted to the old formula being used by Animal Planet that "When the Buying stops, the killing will too."

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For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

Editors: Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher.

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

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